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# Unison, Workplace Learning and Enhancing Learning Network Theory: A Case Study

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## **Abstract**

Following a review of the UK's long term skill requirements in 2006 (Leitch 2006), the government has been looking at ways to increase the UK's skills base through employer engagement in training and education. Trade unions and higher education institutions have had a vital role in this process through the establishment of a wide variety of collaborative projects aimed at enhancing basic, intermediate and higher skills. One example of such a partnership is the Learning Partnership Route (LPR) to Social Work qualification. Whilst a number of authors have detailed the role of trade unions in work-based learning partnerships with public sector organisations, including in social care (see, for example, Sutherland and Rainbird 2000), there is a shortage of academic literature relating specifically to UNISON's role in informal learning in these organisations.

This research study uses a case study method applying a critical realist approach, to look in depth at one social care organisation in which the LPR was run. The key theory utilised for data analysis is the Learning Network Theory (LNT) (Poell et al 2000). The LNT is one theory which has been put forward to describe organisational learning in the literature and uses the actors, structures and processes to interpret and describe how learning is organised.

The case study findings revealed how Unison's trusting relationship with the social care employer and their coherent notion of the concept of a learning organisation, enabled them to become involved in both formal and informal aspects of workplace learning. Evidence is also presented to critique and enhance the LNT, extending the LNT to incorporate the concepts of formal and informal learning.



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## 1. Introduction

Over time the UK government has recognised the need to support the acquisition of new skills by the country's workforce to ensure that the UK's economy can successfully compete internationally. This has involved a substantial increase in the number of students in formal further and higher education. Associated with this development has been increasing interest in how work-based training and education can contribute to the acquisition of the higher skills that the UK's economy needs. A climate in which the employing organisation participates in or leads the way in the learning and teaching of skills has been created. Policies and intellectual endeavor in this field affecting the private sector have impacted on public social care organisations. There has been a growth in the expectations of both private and public employers that their organisations become learning organisations. In the private sector, arguably, this directly contributes to effectiveness in the marketplace. In the public sector the picture is more complex. This thesis explores aspects of the learning organisation within the public sector. It examines the role of Britain and Europe's biggest public sector trade union, UNISON, in social care workplace learning, and provides evidence to enhance network theory (LNT).

Following a review of the UK's long-term skill requirements in 2006 (Leitch 2006), the former Labour government looked at ways of increasing the UK's skills base by engaging employers in training and education. Trade unions and higher education institutions have had a vital role in this process through the establishment of a wide variety of collaborative projects aimed at enhancing basic, intermediate and higher skills. One example of such a partnership is the Learning Partnership Route to social work (LPRSW) qualification run by UNISON, the Open University (OU) and a number of social care organisations. This research study uses a

case study method applying a critical realist approach to look in depth at one social care organisation in which the LPR was run.

Research has shown that the development of a learning culture can be an important determinant of the success of work-based programmes (Kelly and Stone 2003). The research outlined in this thesis has two key objectives; to investigate the role of UNISON in formal and informal workplace learning opportunities and to explore how UNISON can support and help to implement a learning organisation and culture within a social care organisation.

This chapter provides an overview of some of the key academic literature on the creation of learning organisations, workplace learning and the role of trade unions in these processes. Research objectives are then presented with the aim of addressing the gaps identified in the academic literature in this area. Following this, information about the LPRSW degree is provided along with a short summary of the case study method utilised in this research. The chapter ends with a summary of the rest of the thesis.

Academic literature stemming from the 1970s describes the move away from industrialist and modern society with the emergence of post-industrialism (Touraine 1971, Bell 1973).

Touraine (1971) describes the change from a social class system based upon ownership and control of private property to a class system based upon access to information. Bell (1973) emphasises knowledge and information as the key resources of post-industrial society and with them, the creation of knowledge elites who control these resources. These changes have meant that previous forms of work organisation underpinned by the principles of scientific management described by Taylor (1911) have been replaced by the need for higher skills and a commitment to learning at all levels. This importance of both formal qualifications and

informal learning in the UK workplace is highlighted in the 1998 Green Paper 'The Learning Age: A Renaissance for a New Britain' (DfEE 1998):

To achieve stable and sustainable growth, we will need a well-educated, well-equipped and adaptable labour force. To cope with rapid change we must ensure that people can return to learning throughout their lives. We cannot rely on a small elite: we will need the creativity, enterprise and scholarship of all our people.  
(Blunkett 1998, p1)

In 2004 the Leitch Review considered the UK's long term skills requirements. The review evaluated the UK's skills position in comparison to other countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as that of an 'average performer' (Leitch 2006). Consequently the government is keen to encourage employers and employees to engage in workplace learning. In 2006 the Department for Education and Skills stated in its grant letter to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) that it wanted to see priority given to widening participation and employer engagement in higher education. The Higher Education Academy (HEA 2007) identified employer engagement as one of its key areas for 2006-2007 policy debate. A number of strategies for increasing employer engagement in higher education have since emerged, including the role of trade unions in providing access to education and training (Leitch 2006, p96). The Leitch Report addresses the need to embed a culture of learning (ibid, pp103-116) in line with changing global economic circumstances and the need for widening participation in response to the unequal distribution of skills identified by the review.

If Leitch (2006) is right and there is a role for trade unions engaging employers in education

and training we have to ask questions about the extent to which they can achieve this considering recent changes to trade union membership in work organisations. In 2005 only 26.2% of UK workers were members of a trade union (ESRC 2007), a significant decline compared to the late 1970s, when 58% of workers were members. In 2005 only 17% of private sector workers were members of a trade union compared to 59% of public sector workers. There were also higher percentages of women, older employees and those in professional occupations. These figures indicate that trade unions may indeed have a role to play in widening participation in higher education, particularly in the public sector, as they are in a key position to promote learning and negotiate workplace learning opportunities with employers. The latest UK union membership figures provided by the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR) for the year 2008 indicate that 24.9% of UK workers were trade union members (BERR 2009, p2), a decline of 1.5% of private sector workers and 1.9% of public sector workers over three years. Despite this decline, trade unions still have considerable influence in public sector organisations.

The UK currently appears to be struggling to keep up with the needs of the economy in terms of its workforce's skills levels. The need for versatile and high-level skills is of increasing importance, particularly with the global shift from an industrial to a service and knowledge based economy. Trade unions have had and continue to play a role in training and learning in the UK workplace. A summary of the different types of trade unions and their role in workplace learning and training is given in the literature review in Chapter 2.

Payne (2001a) considers the benefits to trade unions of involvement in training and education in the workplace. He argues that trade unions 'have used education and training as a way of

securing their own positions as bureaucratic, representative organisations' (ibid, p357). Trade unions are able to use their involvement with education and training as a recruiting point from which to rebuild their strength and membership in the new economy. Payne (2001a) also discusses the role of the partnerships that trade unions have been establishing with educational institutions, most frequently as a means of widening participation and incorporating adults seen as disadvantaged or underrepresented. However educational institutions have identified perceptions that trade unions have a 'narrow' perspective on workplace training which are problematic.

Mahnkopf (1991) examines efforts made by trade unions to confront political, social, economic, cultural and environmental changes during the last few decades, in particular since the 1970s. These studies have focused on issues of industrial relations such as collective bargaining arrangements, change at the organisational level within the trade unions themselves and union responses and strategies. Hake (1999) argues that 'late modernity is the period of social development in which lifelong learning becomes the necessary condition of survival'. Payne (2001b) and Sutherland and Rainbird (2000) highlight the increased scope for trade unions in education and training to respond to this necessary condition for survival and to improve the position of low-skilled workers in the workplace.

Payne (2001a) identifies a lack of literature pertaining to the contribution that trade unions are making and can make to lifelong learning. One example of how the trade union UNISON, in collaboration with the Open University, has been involved in lifelong learning is through an initiative to widen participation in learning in the social care sector referred to as the Learning Partnership Route (LPR). This route was established in addition to UNISON's 'work based



learning escalator'<sup>1</sup> (Route Guide, The Open University 2006, p7). Continuing tension exists concerning this 'escalator' regarding the question of the level at which trade union involvement should appropriately stop. Should UNISON support access to higher education (1<sup>st</sup> level), continue to the first year of higher education (HE) study (2<sup>nd</sup> level – K100 Foundation Course, Understanding Health and Social Care) or aim even higher? Given that many believe the trade union's primary responsibility is the terms and conditions of employment and crises in these areas, is its involvement in the escalator a distraction or a luxury?

As the largest public sector union in Britain and Europe UNISON has 1.3 million members, of which two thirds are women (UNISON 2010a). The union lists four main objectives in its outline 'Objectives and Priorities for 2010' (UNISON 2010b). The first is recruiting, organising, representing and retaining members; the second, negotiating and bargaining on behalf of members and promoting equality; the third, campaigning and promoting UNISON on behalf of its members; and the fourth, developing an efficient and effective union. Learning is referred to specifically under Objective 2.1: Improving Pay and Conditions through the Promotion of Lifelong Learning, Skills Pathways and Workforce Development (UNISON 2010b). Learning activities are managed by UNISON's Learning and Organising Services (LAOS), which coordinate UNISON's education and lifelong learning opportunities for its membership. In addition to offering a national activist training programme, lifelong learning opportunities on the work-based learning escalator range from skills for life to higher education opportunities. Regional education officers provide the link between UNISON's

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<sup>1</sup> Unison has worked with partners, including employers and the Open University, to put in place a skills escalator. This ranges from Skills for Life and Health (including English as an Additional Language), through 'second chance' learning and work-based professional qualifications.

national learning strategy and its members and LAOS provides workplace learning programmes such as 'Return to Learn'.

UNISON, therefore, has an interest in the lifelong learning of its members, many of whom may have had limited educational opportunities that a widening participation approach to higher education could address. A review of the widening participation literature carried out by the University of York's Higher Education Academy and Institute for Access Studies (Gorard and Smith 2006) focuses on addressing the barriers to participation in higher education. This is a particularly important review for present purposes, as the LPRSW aimed to address these barriers to social work education. The LPR attempted to attract social care employees who lacked traditional qualifications and those who had not studied for and gained a higher educational qualification. This route to a degree in social work was also known as the 'grow your own' scheme. It allowed employers to invest in their current workforce and up-skill staff to fill social work vacancies, thus avoiding having to recruit staff from other countries or use employment agencies to fill the social workforce gap. So there are potential synergies between the employer and UNISON objectives. Gorard and Smith (2006) argue that there is a gap in the widening participation literature: more information is required about students participating in non-traditional higher education, including part time and vocational qualifications. Their review provides additional evidence of the importance of research into the LPR.

Social care employers are required to improve opportunities for their employees and members to develop their skills and abilities respectively. They, like UNISON, are looking for reliable and robust routes for this which may include supporting workers with previous limited

educational opportunities. Widening participation has been a key New Labour theme (Callender 2002); hence the relevance of examining how the government supports employers, – in this thesis, social care employers – in terms of widening participation. Government policies on widening participation are discussed by Dey et al (2004) in relation to the present need for skills (Leitch 2006). Dey et al (2004) highlight a government initiative to ensure that 50% of the UK's 19-30 year olds had had at least one year's experience of higher education by 2010. In order to reach this national target a range of strategies were implemented including the establishment of the Aim Higher Partnerships for Progression, which were designed with the objective of raising aspirations and encouraging the development of clear progression routes to higher education. Dey et al (2004) state:

Figures suggest that the UK is well behind other European countries in generating the 'technician skills' which the economy lacks with just 28% of the workforce qualified at this level compared with 51% in France and 65% in Germany. (Dey et al 2004, p1)

Evidence provided by the Aim Higher project indicates that for lifelong education to be achieved, children as young as 12 need to become comfortable with the idea of continuing education beyond compulsory schooling age and on to university (Green 2000). Dey et al (2004), however, reason that this is not achievable. It implies unaffordable growth both in higher education and in a support infrastructure for these children and young people. Instead, they argue for an increase in work-based learning via part-time study.

One example of this is the now discontinued part-time work-based learning initiative Learning to Care introduced by the Open University with the intention of increasing the recruitment and retention of students with low educational qualifications in the health and social care sector.

This partnership between the Cambridgeshire College of Further Education and the Open University's Faculty of Health and Social Care offered a work-based distance learning route to a professional award, a Diploma in Social Work in line with the Open University's target of increasing participation in higher education by people of low socioeconomic groups with low previous educational qualifications (Open University 2001-2004). Dey et al (2004), who evaluate this Open University initiative, argue that this is particularly necessary in a sector characterised by low pay and low aspirations, and highlight that this is a matter for concern about this sector both regionally and nationally. The Learning to Care project was suggested as part of a broader philosophy, that of the 'learning organisation' (ibid). Research has shown that the development of a learning culture may be an important determinant in the success of work-based programmes (Kelly and Stone 2003). For example, it may be that if employers and others involved in the workplace, for example UNISON, with a vested interest in successful outcomes for workers engaged in higher education are not engaged as partners in a 'learning organisation', expectations may not be realised.<sup>2</sup>

The notion of organisational learning was coined by Chris Argyris in 1978, and the concept of the learning organisation was popularised by Peter Senge (1990) in his book *The Fifth Discipline*. Senge (1990, p.3) sees the ideas he presents as a tool...

...for destroying the illusion that the world is created of separate, unrelated forces. When we give up this illusion – we can then build 'learning organisations'. Organisations where people continually expand their capacity to create results they truly deserve, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn

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<sup>2</sup> For further examples of UNISON learning partnerships refer to Munro et (1997) and Rainbird et al (2010).

together’.

According to Gould (2000), interest in the concept of the learning organisation emerged in social care organisations during the 1990s. Gould recognised that despite:

...rapidly changing patterns of social need where organisational change is not an occasional ‘blip’ but a continuous fact of life...there has so far been no evident thinking about the transfer of learning organisation theory to social work organisations. (ibid, p585)

However, Gould appears to have ignored the wider influence that individual training, i.e. formal learning, could have on the organisation. The benefits of work-based learning programmes, not just for the individual employee but for the whole organisation, are well-documented (see Clarke 2003, Davies and Bynner 1999); and Eraut et al (1998) remark upon the important role of formal planned learning in organisations. The benefits of work-based learning for both the individual and the organisation involved are considered in this thesis.

Taylor (2004) dates the application of the learning organisation literature to the public sector to the late 1990s with its appearance in New Labour’s modernisation agenda. The agenda drew upon the lifelong learning discourse and an assumption that such learning can be achieved through the creation of learning organisations (ibid). However, evidence published in Pedler et al’s (1990) *Self Development in Organizations* indicates that there was research into public sector learning organisations during the 1980s, with theorists such as Edmonstone (1990) studying the application of the concept of the learning organisation to the public sector with a particular focus on management competencies and development and the changed

expectations of managers in terms of education and training in the public sector workplace.

Academic interest in the concept of the learning organisation and its applicability to the public sector continued to gain strength throughout the 1990s. A focus on its transferability to the public sector can be found in a collection of writings edited by Cook et al (1997). Limitations of the Investors of People award are highlighted, with Cook (1997, p.21) arguing:

Its focus on training as opposed to learning (quite correct in itself) is not the total approach needed to develop organizational learning...How is learning (outside of formal training) measured in this same way?

So in addition to addressing the concept of the learning organisation in connection with public sector organisations, Cook (1997) also contemplates the difficulty of recognising and rewarding non- formal learning.

Parallel to the interest in the concept of the learning organisation in recent years there has been a renewed interest in work-based learning, with numerous publications on the subject. This rise in interest is alleged to have resulted from global competition and an era of rapidly shifting environments to which organisations must adapt to survive (Marsick 2006); and in the case of the public sector, must provide adequate services. In order for organisations to adapt and be competitive, Marsick and Volpe (1999) argue, former training and education are insufficient and managers need to 'unleash creativity and innovation' (p2).

Two key types of work-based learning are distinguished in the academic literature, namely formal and informal learning. Marsick and Watkins (1990, p12) suggest that:

Formal learning is typically institutionally sponsored, classroom-based, and highly structured. Informal learning, a category that includes incidental learning, may occur in institutions, but is not class room based or highly structured, and control of learning rests primarily in the hands of the learner.

The research objectives incorporate an exploration of both of these types of learning in the case study organisation.

Rainbird (2004, p3) argues that 'most workplace learning occurs through everyday working practices'. Discussing informal learning in the workplace, Marsick (2006) outlines the nature of informal learning and distinguishes between two types: strategic and non strategic. Marsick (ibid, p63) provides a description of strategic learning in the workplace and defines it as a type of learning that 'is recognised and utilised to move the organisation towards its objectives'. However, he does not offer any contrasting description and exploration of non-strategic informal learning.

Marsick and Volpe (1999) summarise themes identified through a number of studies of informal learning and postulate that informal learning can comprise the following characteristics:

- it can be integrated with work and daily routines;
- it can be triggered by an internal or external jolt;
- it is not highly conscious;
- it is often haphazard and influenced by chance;
- it involves an inductive process of reflection and action and is linked to the learning of

others.

Marsick (2006) discusses informal learning further to identify characteristics which make it more effective, including when partners come together to solve problems and then modify practices or rules to prevent problems from reoccurring. He (2006) also draws on his work with Volpe (1999) to discuss instances when informal learning is unsuccessful, identifying barriers such as resources, structures and culture, for instance where an agency or individual professional is not open to or will not take into account the views of others. Marsick (2006) also highlights potential problems with informal learning when employees do not fully understand what they have learnt and argues:

*Informal learning may suffer from its very strength, that is, that it takes place almost unconsciously as people meet the demands that require the acquisition of new mental models, knowledge and skills. (p57)*

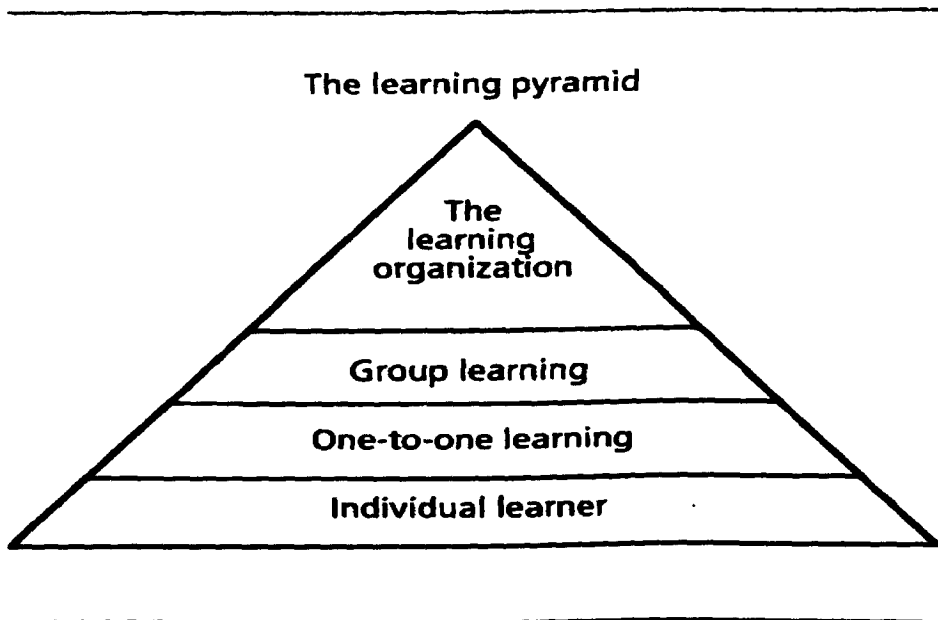
Marsick and Watkins (2001) argue that informal and incidental learning are the most pervasive forms of adult learning and can be enhanced through formal learning, i.e. via educational intervention. They contend that formal adult learning ‘may also be enhanced if adult educators heed the lessons learned informally and incidentally’ (p32). However, it could be argued that both educators and learners should pay attention to lessons learnt from informal learning in order to enhance formal learning.

Mumford (1996) links informal learning and the learning organisation with his learning pyramid (see Figure 1.1). Mumford (1996) reviews several books relating to learning organisations and suggests that whilst the concept of the learning organisation may be an



ambition for many of us, line managers may reject this enthusiasm with the concern that it could lead to their own position in the organisation being challenged or competed for. Interestingly, in his learning pyramid Mumford (1996) highlights one to one learning, which he believes has not been considered by either Senge (1990) or Watkins and Marsick (1993), who focus their thoughts about the learning organisation on team learning. In the learning pyramid the learning organisation is seen as the final objective for an organisation to achieve.

**Figure 1.1: The Learning Pyramid**



Source: Mumford, 2006, p7

These ideas about formal and informal learning in organisations are very much a functionalist view; that is, any training or learning by employees should primarily meet the needs of the organisation and the employee's specific job skill requirements. In the 1990s, however, with increasing globalisation and the emergence of the knowledge economy, learning and training was approached in alternative ways. The LNT postulated by Krogt (1995) attempts to explain

organisational learning through the perspectives of the actors involved and as dependent on the individual organisational context, as opposed to viewing it as a functionalist tool or as context-independent.

The learning network theorists argue that empirical research conducted by training professionals has not enabled learning programmes to be tuned to the workplace, nor has it explained the variance in the effectiveness of such programmes (Poell and Krogt 2006). They contend that there should be a new direction for theory and research in this area and that the diversity of relations among people in the work environment is deserving of greater attention. They put forward LNT in an attempt to provide a theoretical framework for the study of learning in the workplace. The account of their work below briefly provides an overview of the origins of the theory and their earlier work before their most recent work is discussed.

LNT is succinctly explained by Poell and Krogt (2006) in their book *Learning at the Workplace Reviewed: Theory Confronted with Empirical Research*, in which they argue that learning and development are processes which ‘happen less systematically and less consciously than assumed’ (p71). They propose a theory of work-based learning built on the core premises of three different learning theories; structural, actor and cybernetic systems. This theory is described and critically analysed in the literature review chapter of this thesis.

LNT is potentially a useful tool for the description and interpretation of learning in an organisation. Yet there is little published research that claims to have applied the theory to real-life examples, and there is no detailed information about the method by which this can be achieved. However, the theory does seem to provide an alternative way to think about

workplace learning and the many actors involved, not just those within the workplace or a specific learning environment. The work of Krogt (1995) and Poell et al (2000) on LNT is used here to further understand the dynamics of the LPR case study partnership through the application of their interpretative framework to the case study data.

### **The Learning Partnership Route to Social Work Degree: Case study**

The partnership between UNISON and the OU's Health and Social Care Faculty selected for the case study in this research originated in 1996, when they came together with the aim of widening participation and increasing employer involvement in social work education. The protocol for widening participation the social work qualification was to ensure that the majority of students who registered had not previously studied for an undergraduate or postgraduate qualification and that it incorporated those from a disadvantaged background. The first learning partnership run by the faculty was the K100 foundation course, Understanding Health and Social Care, for which students were recruited in groups from the workplace. This initial partnership was expanded to include the Diploma in Social Work Qualification (DipSW). The DipSW-UNISON partnership route was run in conjunction with two of the OU regions. Following this initial partnership between the OU and UNISON to provide the DipSW, time was spent liaising with UNISON and employers to reach agreement on the way forward for the partnership with the introduction of the Social Work degree.

The OU's Social Work degree is a work-based route designed to be completed in no less than three years. Responsibility and management for it were usually shared between the OU and the employers, who fund and sponsor students. However, UNISON was also involved in the management of the LPR degree. The LPRSW degree commenced in 2006 with 36 social care

employees registering on the OU's K100 foundation course, Understanding Health and Social Care and K113, Foundations for Social Work Practice. In launching the LPR there was the aspiration that employees who took part would not have studied for a higher educational qualification previously. The route was launched with a target of at least 60% of students from each employer reflecting this criterion in addition to the normal requirements for those applying for the OU's Social Work Degree programme, which include:

- a qualification at Key Skills Level 2 (Key Stage 4 in English and Maths);
- evidence of clear communication in spoken and written English;
- ability to demonstrate appropriate personal and intellectual qualities of a social worker;
- enhanced disclosure from the CRB;
- attendance at interview.

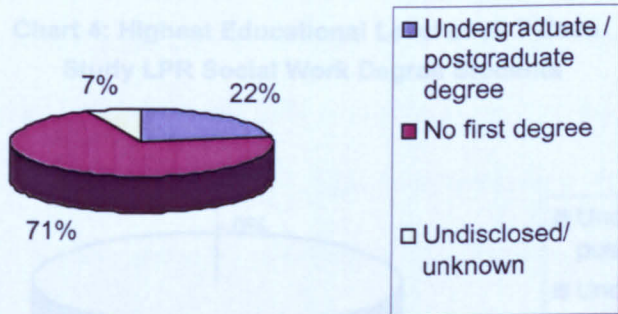
The following three key objectives are specified in the LPR guide:

1. To target employees who have experience in social care work but do not have higher educational qualifications
2. To provide additional support to maximise successful outcomes of degree-level professional and academic studies
3. To coordinate contributions from employers, The OU and UNISON (OU, 2006, p7).

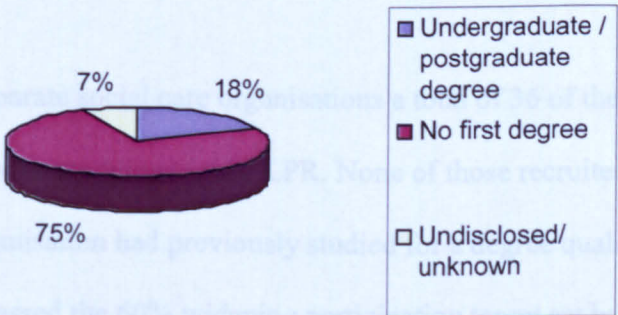
Data obtained from the OU HSC work-based learning database include details of the educational backgrounds of all students on its Social Work degree. The figures below summarize these data for the 301 students who started the course in 2006. Figure 1.2 details

the educational background of all 301: Figure 1.3, that of the 265 non-LPR students and Figure 1.4 the educational background of the 36 LPR students. A comparison of Figures 1.3 and 1.4 reveals that despite the widening participation objective of the LPR route, a high percentage of these students (Figure 3.1, 44%, 16 students) had previously studied for a degree. In contrast to the non LPR students who commenced study on the social work degree in the same academic year, only 18% 48 students (see Figure 1.3) had previously studied for a higher educational qualification.

**Chart 1: Highest Educational Level of all 301 (2006)  
Open University Social Work Degree Students**

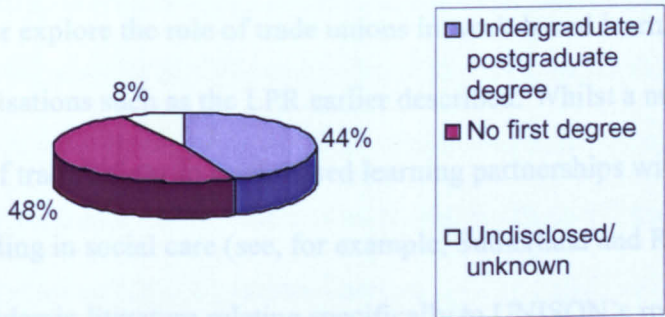


**Chart 2: Highest Educational Level of the 265 (2006)  
Open University Social Work Degree Students  
not on the Learning Partnership Route**

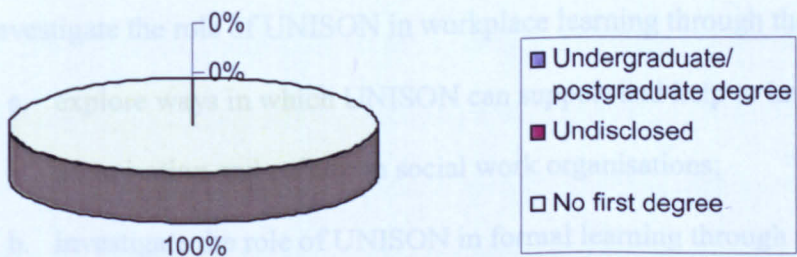




**Chart 3: Highest Educational Level of the 36 Open University Social Work Degree Students Studying on the Learning Partnership Route**



**Chart 4: Highest Educational Level of all 7 Case Study LPR Social Work Degree Students**



In two separate social care organisations a total of 36 of the 2006 OU Social Work degree students were studying via the LPR. None of those recruited onto the LPR through the case study organisation had previously studied for a degree qualification (see Figure 1.4). Thus the LPR surpassed the 60% widening participation target set by the OU and UNISON in the LPR Route Guide (OU 2006, p8).

## **Research Aims and Objectives**

A review of the current literature pertaining to work-based learning uncovered a need to further explore the role of trade unions in work-based learning partnerships with social care organisations such as the LPR earlier described. Whilst a number of authors have detailed the role of trade unions in work-based learning partnerships with public sector organisations, including in social care (see, for example, Sutherland and Rainbird 2000), there is a shortage of academic literature relating specifically to UNISON's role in informal learning in these organisations. This research aims to address these knowledge gaps by applying LNT (Krogt 1995, Poell et al 2000). The research's aims and objectives are as follows:

1. Identify and explore the concept of a learning organisation from the viewpoint of the actors involved in the LPR using the SCIE learning organisation resource (2004)
2. Investigate the role of UNISON in workplace learning through the LPRSW degree:
  - a. explore ways in which UNISON can support and help to implement a learning organisation and culture in social work organisations;
  - b. investigate the role of UNISON in formal learning through the LPRSW degree;
  - c. investigate the role of UNISON in informal learning through the LPRSW degree;
3. Contribute to and increase understanding of social care workplace learning theory and research methods.

## **Methods used**

The philosophical basis of the methodology used to investigate the research aims and objectives is critical realism (Christie et al 2000), and a case study method was employed. The following units of analysis were identified in relation to exploring UNISON's role in formal and informal learning in social care organisations. These units of analysis are taken from the LNT (Poell et al 2000), which is explained in Chapter 2 and further developed in Chapter 5.

1. Actors and their action theories;
2. Learning processes (development of learning policies and programmes, and execution of learning programmes);
3. Learning structures (content and organisational structure and learning climate).

Six of the most popular sources of case study evidence cited by Yin (2009) are documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation and physical artefacts. Both documentation (including archival records) and interviews were used as the sources of evidence for this case study. The most common research method used to explore informal learning in the workplace is identified by Eraut (2004) as interview studies. Researchers have used a variety of interview techniques to explore learning in the workplace; these include asking participant employees to give detailed accounts of their daily work practices and focusing the interview on critical incidents. The research interview technique employed in this research involved asking each of the participants to consider the SCIE Learning Organisation characteristics and how and to what extent, if any, they believe these are incorporated into their organisation. The aim of the research was thus not to tackle the issue of informal learning directly but to investigate where informal learning is a conscious process in the organisation.



A preliminary research survey was carried out via telephone interviews with OU students as a source of evidence. A semi-structured, predominantly closed-question interview schedule was utilised. The case study interviews were alternatively based on a semi-structured interview schedule and open questions, further details of which can be found in the Method section under Measures. It was hoped that with the interviews only slightly structured, in that there was an outline of the topics to be covered, there was room for in-depth insights and for interviewees to talk at length about the topics without much restriction or steering from the researcher, thus providing qualitative insights and enabling the exploration necessary to meet the research objectives.

Documentation was used as an additional source of evidence. This was collected from the interviewees before, during and after the interviews. The types of documentation provided included email correspondence, minutes of meetings, internal reports, evaluation reports, news clippings and organisational structure and process figures.

A pilot student survey was conducted using a random sample of 50 of the total 301 non-LPR students from England studying on the K113 course. They were all contacted by email and asked if they would be willing to participate in an interview. The random sample was selected by the OU survey office to ensure the reliability and validity of results. The LPR sample had already been identified by the student survey panel, and appropriate contact details had been provided. All 36 of the LPR students were contacted by email and asked to participate. In total 16 LPR and non-LPR student telephone interviews were completed. This initial piece of research was a scoping exercise conducted with a view to eliciting the main differences between the experiences of students studying for the regular social work degree with the OU

and those studying through the LPR. The results were used to formulate the case study research objectives.

The site selected for this case study research is the social care organisation and other organisations that have contributed to the LPR; namely the OU and UNISON. To gather data for the case study from interviews required a purposeful sampling strategy. There are clearly key individuals or learning ‘actors’ in each of the organisations who are involved in the planning and running of the partnership, and in the social care organisation itself, key individuals who are in charge of learning.

The population from which the snowball sample was taken comprised employees at the case study social care organisation, UNISON and the OU and also incorporated other individuals identified as having played a part in the Learning Partnership. Seventeen interviews were carried out; thirteen face to face and four via telephone. Data were also collected via sixteen preliminary field work telephone interviews carried out with OU Social Work degree students. Seven of these students were studying on the LPR. Table 1.1, below, presents a summary of the case study participants.

**Table 1.1: Summary of Case Study Participants**

Participant Group	Number of Participants
OU (non student participants)	6
OU Students	16 (LPR = 7)
UNISON	5
Social Care Organisation	5
Other	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>33</b>

Participants were identified using the snowball approach. This was achieved by asking initial contacts to identify and provide contact details of others involved in the partnership.

Telephone or email contact was made, asking if they would be willing to participate in a face to face or telephone interview at their convenience.

### **Thesis Chapter Outline**

#### **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

The study of learning opportunities through the partnership case study calls for the incorporation of academic literature from a number of areas including current and historic industrial relations in the UK; politics; widening participation; human resource management practices (HRM); and literature pertaining to the concept of the learning organisation, in particular that regarding informal and formal learning. In addition to this literature, the work of Poell et al (2000) on the LNT was critically analysed before being used to further understand the dynamics of the case study partnership in question. This current political perspective on skills and learning is addressed first and then the role of trade unions is outlined. Literature on the concepts of the learning organisation, organisational workplace learning and the LNT is then outlined and reviewed

#### **Chapter 3: Methods**

The philosophical assumptions on which this research is based are outlined and discussed. The philosophical basis of the methodology used was critical realism. The philosophy of social research is detailed before moving on to an explanation of the research and data collection methods employed.

## Chapter 4: The Context of the Learning Partnership Route

In this chapter the context surrounding the LPR is described and analysed. The first part of the chapter explores the development of trade union involvement in workplace learning. The case study's social care context is then presented to support an understanding of its implementation of LPR and why the initiative was taken forward. Lastly, drawing on evidence from the case study, details are provided about when the partnership with the employer was first set up and how this initiative built on the trust established through earlier programmes delivered through the partnership.

## Chapter 5: Interpretative Framework

The key principles of LNT theory are outlined in the literature review. The first part of this chapter explores LNT in greater detail to support and further understand the theory in the data analysis/discussion chapters. In the second part of the chapter the theory is applied to the LPR in order to describe the actors, processes and structure of this learning partnership. Evidence is presented from both the interview and the documentary data gathered during the case study research.

## Chapter 6: The Role of UNISON in Formal Learning

The nature of formal learning, considered in the literature review chapter, is defined by Marsick and Watkins (1990) as '...typically institutionally sponsored, classroom based, and highly structured'. This research aimed to uncover not only the formal but also the informal learning that occurs as a part of this network. The focus of this chapter is solely on the formal learning aspects of the LPR learning network, and in particular the role that UNISON has played in this process. Following this, evidence from the research data is used to explore the

concept of a formal learning network and to identify what type of learning network this represents based on Poell et al's (2000) descriptions, which are outlined in Chapter 5.

## Chapter 7: The Interaction between Formal and Informal Learning

This chapter explores the interaction between formal and informal learning in the LPR learning network. This analysis is important, as learning in the LPR learning network was clearly not limited to formal learning. For this discussion, however, consideration must be given to the very nature of formal and informal learning themselves to identify whether these terms are useful in our understanding of workplace learning and LNT, and more importantly for the case study, whether or not they are useful terms to employ in relation to learning in social care.

## Chapter 8: Enhancing Learning Network Theory

In this chapter the analysis in Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 are drawn together to reflect on the benefits and limitations of the LNT and some substantial modifications are proposed. Following this, some alternatives to the theory are considered to enhance the interpretation of the case study data.

## Chapter 9: Conclusions

This chapter summarises the main findings from the case study research and addresses the research questions outlined in the introductory chapter. This is followed by a summary of the key conclusions that can be drawn from this LPR learning network case study research. Proposals for additional research that would contribute to further progress in this academic area are then outlined. Finally, reflections on the case study are presented, including a brief

look at alternative approaches and the future of workplace learning in light of recent political changes in the UK.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

The main focus of this thesis is the nature of workplace learning in social care with an investigation into the role of one trade union in a learning partnership with a social care organisation and the OU. This is achieved through the development of LNT. This literature review provides a background to the empirical research presented. The learning opportunities studied through this partnership case study call for a complex integration of academic literature from a number of areas including widening participation, the concept of the learning organisation, and workplace learning, in particular informal and formal learning. In addition to this literature, the work of Poell et al (2000) on LNT is critically analysed before being used to further understand the dynamics of the case study partnership in question. The current political perspective on skills and learning is addressed first and the role of trade unions in this in relation to learning opportunities and the LPR case study is discussed. Literature on workplace learning, LNT and concepts of the 'learning organisation' and 'organisational learning', which have been investigated most widely in the private sector, are then outlined and reviewed. Lastly, the latest research into learning in the workplace is discussed.

### **UK Skills and Trade Unionism**

In 2004 the Leitch review considered the UK's long-term skills requirements and found the UK to be an 'average performer' regarding the skills of its workers compared to other OECD countries (Leitch Report 2006). Consequently the government was and is still keen to encourage employers and employees to engage in workplace learning. In 2006 the Department for Education and Skills stated in its grant letter to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE 2006) that it wanted priority given to widening participation and employer

engagement in higher education. The Higher Education Academy (HEA) also identified employer engagement as one of its key areas for 2006-2007 policy debate (HEA 2007). A number of strategies for increasing employer engagement in higher education have emerged since, including a role for trade unions in providing access to education and training (Leitch 2006, p96). The Leitch Report addressed the need to embed a culture of learning (Leitch 2006, p103-116) in line with changing global economic circumstances and the need for wider participation in learning in response to the review's identification of the unequal distribution of skills.

If Leitch (2006) is right and there is a role for trade unions engaging employers in education and training we have to ask questions about the extent to which they can achieve this considering recent changes to trade union membership in work organisations. In 2005 only 26.2% of UK workers were members of a trade union (ESRC 2007), a significant decline compared to the late 1970s, when 58% of workers were members. In 2005 only 17% of private sector workers were members of a trade union compared to 59% of public sector workers. There were also higher percentages of women, older employees and those in professional occupations. These figures indicate that trade unions may indeed have a role to play in widening participation in higher education, particularly in the public sector, as they are in a key position to promote learning and negotiate workplace learning opportunities with employers. The latest UK union membership figures provided by the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR) for the year 2008 indicate that 24.9% of UK workers were trade union members (BERR 2009, p2), a decline of 1.5% of private sector workers and 1.9% of public sector workers over three years. Despite this decline, trade unions still have considerable influence in public sector organisations.



The emergence of the first trade unions is dated by the Trade Union Congress (TUC) to the period 1815-1835 (TUC 2010). Flanders (1968) describes five types of trade union that have appeared over the years; craft, general, industrial, non-manual and industrial federations. Craft unions were the first committed form of local organisation to emerge, later amalgamating into national form with the creation of large multi-craft unions such as the Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers. The general trade unions, namely the Transport and General Workers' Union and the Municipal Workers' Union, were open to fields of employment that most unions ignored. Industrial unions such as the British Iron, Steel and Kindred Trades Association (BISAKTA) resulted from the amalgamation of smaller industrial unions, although none were successful in dominating their industries due to the strength of the General Workers' Union. In contrast to industrial unions, industrial federations were made up of several unions representing the same industry such as the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions. These joint organisations allowed the various types of union to work together, enabling a closer unity between them and a reduction in conflict.

Historically one role of the trade unions has been controlling entry to various crafts through the use of apprenticeship schemes. They had a dual role in producing highly-skilled workers earning high wages through limiting the labour supply (Payne 2001a). Currently, and as highlighted above, the UK appears to be struggling to keep up with the needs of the economy in terms of the skills level of its workforce. The need for versatile and high-level skills is increasingly important, particularly with the global shift from an industrial to a service and knowledge-based economy.

Sutherland and Rainbird (2000, p192) identify three major stakeholders in workplace learning: 'government, employers and individual employees represented by their trade unions'. The major stakeholders in the LPR case study are analysed and further discussed in Chapter 5. Sutherland and Rainbird (ibid) also describe the reasons behind trade union interest in workplace learning. Firstly, as trade union members receive learning and training opportunities at work, this has an effect on employees' bargaining power and employability, factors at the heart of trade union concerns. Secondly, some members are already employed in educational institutions. Thirdly, trade unions' involvement in workplace learning is another means by which they can tackle wider social issues such as widening participation and social exclusion. Lastly, unions such as UNISON provide learning opportunities themselves.

While these four reasons for trade union involvement all point to altruistic motives, the benefits to trade unions themselves have been theorised. Payne (2001a) considers how trade unions benefit through their involvement in training and education in the workplace. He argues that they 'have used education and training as a way of securing their own positions as bureaucratic, representative organisations' (Payne 2001a, p357). Trade unions are able to use their concern with education and training as a recruiting point from which to rebuild trade union strength and membership in the new economy.

Like Sutherland and Rainbird (2000), Payne (2001a) also discusses trade unions' role in tackling social exclusion, in particular through the partnerships that they have been establishing with educational institutions. These partnerships have most frequently been established as a means of widening participation and incorporating adults who are seen as disadvantaged or underrepresented. One example of the way in which a trade union has been

attempting to widen participation in higher education in the social care sector is through the introduction of the LPR in collaboration with the OU. This route was established in addition to their 'skills escalator'<sup>1</sup> comprising Skills for Life and Return to Learn courses, introductory care courses and work based study of the OU's foundation course Understanding Health and Social Care (OU 2006, p7).

A review of the widening participation literature carried out by the University of York's Higher Education Academy and Institute for Access Studies (Gorard and Smith 2006) focuses on addressing the barriers to participation in higher education. This is a particularly important review for present purposes, as the LPRSW aimed to address these barriers to social work education. The LPR attempted to attract social care employees who lacked traditional qualifications and those who had not studied for and gained a higher educational qualification. This route to a degree in social work was also known as the 'grow your own' scheme. It allowed employers to invest in their current workforce and up-skill staff to fill social work vacancies, thus avoiding having to recruit staff from other countries or use employment agencies to fill the social workforce gap. So there are potential synergies between employer and UNISON objectives. Gorard and Smith (2006) argue that there is a gap in the widening participation literature: more information is required about students participating in non-traditional higher education, including part time and vocational qualifications. Their review provides additional evidence of the importance of research into the LPR.

Social care employers are required to improve opportunities for their employees and members

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<sup>1</sup> UNISON has worked with partners, including employers and the Open University to put in place a skills escalator. This ranges from Skills for Life and Health (including English as an Additional Language), through 'second chance' learning and onto work-based professional qualifications.

to develop their skills and abilities respectively. They, like UNISON, are looking for reliable and robust routes by which to do this, which may include supporting workers with previous limited educational opportunities. Widening participation was a key New Labour theme (Callender 2002); hence the relevance of examining how the government supports employers – in this case social care employers – with it. This is particularly important considering the recent change in government and skills and training policy to this end. This political change and its impact on workplace learning are considered further in Chapter 9. Government policies on widening participation are discussed by Dey et al (2004) in relation to the present need for technician skills discussed earlier (Leitch 2006). Dey et al (2004) highlight a government initiative to ensure that 50% of the UK's 19-30 year olds have at least one year's experience of higher education by 2010. In order to reach this national target a range of strategies have been implemented, including the establishment of the Aim Higher Partnerships for progression. These partnerships were designed with the objective of raising aspirations and encouraging the development of clear progression routes to higher education. Dey et al (2004) state:

Figures suggest that the UK is well behind other European countries in generating the 'technician skills' which the economy lacks with just 28% of the workforce qualified at this level compared with 51% in France and 65% in Germany. (Dey et al 2004, p1)

Evidence provided by the Aim Higher project indicates that for lifelong education to be achieved, children as young as 12 need to become comfortable with the idea of continuing their education beyond compulsory schooling age and on to university (Green 2000). Dey et al (2004), however, reason that this is not achievable. It implies unaffordable growth both in higher education and in a support infrastructure for these children and young people. Instead, they argue for an increase in work-based learning via part-time study.

One example of this is the now discontinued part-time work-based learning initiative Learning to Care, introduced by the OU with the intention of increasing the recruitment and retention of students with low educational qualifications in the health and social care sector. This partnership between the Cambridgeshire College of Further Education and the OU's Faculty of Health and Social Care offered a work-based distance learning route to a professional award, a Diploma in Social Work, in line with the OU's target of increasing participation in higher education by people of low socioeconomic groups with low previous educational qualifications (OU 2001-2004). Dey et al (2004), who evaluate this OU initiative, argue that it is particularly necessary in a sector characterised by low pay and low aspirations, and highlight that this is a matter for concern about this sector both regionally and nationally. The Learning to Care project was suggested as part of a broader philosophy, that of the 'learning organisation' (ibid). Research has shown that the development of a learning culture may be a crucial determinant in the success of work-based programmes (Kelly and Stone 2003). For example, if employers and others such as UNISON that are involved in the workplace with a vested interest in successful outcomes for workers engaged in higher education are not engaged as partners in a 'learning organisation', expectations may not be realised.<sup>2</sup>

### Organisational Learning

The term *organisational learning* was coined by Chris Argyris in 1978 and the concept of the *learning organisation* was popularised by Peter Senge (1990) in his book *The Fifth Discipline*. Senge (1990, p.3) sees the ideas he presents as a tool...

...for destroying the illusion that the world is created of separate, unrelated forces.

When we give up this illusion – we can then build 'learning organisations'.

Organisations where people continually expand their capacity to create results they

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<sup>2</sup> For further examples of UNISON learning partnerships refer to Munro et (1997) and Rainbird et al (2010).

truly deserve, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together.

A rise in the number of publications in this area during the 1990s is documented by Easterby-Smith et al (1999). The different strands of literature that have emerged are outlined followed by a discussion of the application of the learning organisation literature to the public sector, with particular consideration of its value in the social care sector. This review details the literature concerning both *learning organisations* and *organizational learning*, as the two terms are used interchangeably by authors (Finger and Brand 1999).

Easterby-Smith et al (1999) discuss advancements in the learning organisation literature since the 1980s in *Organisational Learning and the Learning Organisation: Developments in Theory and Practice*. They highlight the surge of literature during the 1990s. Its proliferation at that time is also documented in Crossan and Guatto's (1996) survey, which reveals that in 1993 the number of publications in this subject area equalled that of those published in the whole of the 1980s. The continued increase in publications on organisational learning is identified by Bapuji and Crossan (2004), whose search of the Web of Science database revealed that articles published in this area rose from just 4 in 1990 to 98 in 2002. A recent search of the Web of Science (April 2010) for articles with 'organisational learning' in the title revealed 820 publications. This represents a substantial rise since 2002, when 417 articles were found using the same search criteria.

Easterby-Smith et al (1999) describe the field as 'conceptually fragmented', and I explore their perception of this fragmentation here. Much of the literature in the field details the difference

between the learning organisation and organisational learning, and Easterby-Smith et al consider this. They describe the literature on organisational learning as observation and analysis of the 'processes involved in individual and collective learning inside organisations' and that which attends to the learning organisation as action-orientated, 'using specific diagnostic and evaluative methodological tools which can help to identify, promote and evaluate the quality of learning processes inside organizations' (ibid p2). This distinction is made in light of discussions held at the University of Lancaster in September 1996 during a symposium on organisational learning. Whilst Easterby-Smith et al (ibid) state that they are divergent tracks in the literature, the definitions they provide do not explicitly detail the distinction between the two concepts: more specific definitions have been provided, and these are discussed later in this chapter.

According to Easterby-Smith (1997), the literature which can be classified as about organisational learning is split between those who theorise this as either a technical or a social process. Easterby-Smith gives the example of Argyris' technical perspective in his work on organisational learning in the late 1970s. Argyris (1978) is well known for his work on single-, double- and triple-loop learning. In his more recent writing, Argyris (1994) critiques the use of corporate communication techniques such as focus groups and surveys as learning tools. He believed these methods promote defensive behaviour rather than resulting in what he terms double-looped learning, where transparency and taking responsibility enable problem solving. Easterby-Smith (1997), however, recognises limitations to the technical approach in its assumption that people behave rationally and its exclusion of the role of factors such as political agendas. He considers organisational learning from a social perspective which has emerged from those who attend to issues such as social construction, the role played by

political processes and the culture of an organisation. From the social perspective he outlines that: 'Learning is something that emerges from social interactions, normally in the natural work setting' (Easterby-Smith 1997, p4).

Easterby-Smith (1997) also outlines what he considered to be the literature pertaining to the learning organisation, highlighting the work of Senge (1990) and Kolb (1984) on the learning cycle. The social/technical debate discussed earlier under the organisational learning literature is also said to be present in that which contends with the learning organisation.

Finger and Brand (1999) conceptualise the learning organisation and organisational learning slightly more explicitly than Easterby-Smith (1997), focusing specifically on public sector organisations. In line with the earlier depiction they see the learning organisation as 'an ideal towards which organisations will evolve in order to respond to pressures' (these pressures are discussed in more depth later in the review). They describe organisational learning as the activity and process by which organisations can become learning organisations and state that 'organisational learning is therefore, in our view, a particular form of a process of organisational transformation' (Finger and Brand 1999, p137).

Finger and Brand (1999) also highlight that while the literature can be placed under the two distinct headings, the dominant work in this area often fuses the two concepts. They recognise a limitation in their own conceptualisation, as organisational learning does not inevitably lead to the formation of a learning organisation in all circumstances.

Easterby-Smith (1997) argues that whilst a number of theorists of organisational learning have



called for the development of a comprehensive theory, he puts forward the following three reasons to support his conclusion against such a move:

- The literature in this area is mainly understood from a limited number of disciplines which all approach organisational learning with a distinct ontology;
- It would be inappropriate to combine the literature on organisational learning and the learning organisation as they have each already developed distinctive approaches;
- The dissimilar ontological approaches of each of the disciplines would lead to confusion in the research agenda.

Easterby-Smith (1997) outlines what he considers to be the main six academic perspectives on organisational learning. He states: 'The key point here is that each 'discipline' employs a distinct ontology with regard to the social phenomena that are considered to be the core of organisational learning' (p1086). These disciplines are summarised in Table 2, below. Later in this chapter I introduce and discuss LNT. This theory on workplace learning arguably incorporates a number of the disciplines outlined by Easterby-Smith (ibid). LNT is an alternative, integrative approach. With reference to Table 2, LNT incorporates elements of psychology and organisational development, management science, sociology and organisational theory.

**Table 2.1: Disciplines of Organisational Learning**

Discipline	Ontology	Contribution/Ideas	Problematics
Psychology and OD	Human development	Hierarchical organization; importance of context; cognition; underlying values; learning styles; dialogue	Defensive routines; individual to collective transfer
Management science	Information processing	Knowledge; memory; holism; error correction; informing; single and double loop	Non-rational behaviour; short vs. long term; information overload; unlearning.
Sociology and organizational theory	Social structures	Effects of power structure and hierarchy; conflict is normal; ideology and rhetoric; interests of actors	Conflict of interests; organizational politics
Strategy	Competitiveness	Organization-environment interface; levels of learning progressively more desirable; networks; importance of direct experience; population-level learning	Environmental alignment; competitive pressures; general vs. technical learning
Production management	Efficiency	Importance of productivity; learning curves; endogenous and exogenous sources of e learning; links to production design	Limitations of unidimensional measurement; uncertainty about outcomes
Cultural anthropology	Meaning systems	Culture as cause and effect of organizational learning; beliefs; potential cultural superiority	Instability and relativity of culture as barrier to transfer of ideas; whose perspective dominates?

Source: Disciplines of Organizational Learning (Easterby-Smith 1997, p1087)

Senge (1990) states: 'It is no longer sufficient to have one person learning for the organization' and argues that 'the organizations that will truly excel in the future will be the organizations that discover how to tap into people's commitment and capacity to learn at all levels of an organization' (p4). He outlines five disciplines, or, as he calls them, 'component technologies' which together lead to a learning organization: personal mastery, mental models, building a shared vision, team learning and 'system thinking'. He (ibid) identifies system thinking as the fifth discipline, as he believed it to be the discipline that integrates all the others.

Senge's work of (ibid) is revisited by Flood (2000), who reviews the 'fifth discipline' in light of the work of several later authors including Ludwig Von Bertalanffy, Robert. H. Koff and Peter Checkland. Flood (2000) is less positive about the role of system thinking as the key factor in the creation of a learning organisation and concludes that it 'is nothing more than a directed process of critical reflective inquiry looking at the relevance of possible different ways of handling the situation' (p73). If Flood's arguments are to be believed then Senge's (1990) five disciplines alone are not sufficient for the development of a learning organisation.

Pedler et al (1997) discuss the learning organisation in their contemplation of strategies for sustainable development. They summarise why the development of a strategy such as the learning organisation was necessary at the time:

Today's organisational leaders are experiencing a consciousness shift. Where they sought excellence, they now seek learning – not only to achieve excellence but to stay that way through being flexible, intelligent and responsive. This does not just apply to commercial organisations. Schools, hospitals and cities find themselves competing for scarce resources and coping with turbulent and rapidly changing times, while trying to maintain and improve the quality of their services. (p10)

These authors describe a three-stage evolution; surviving, adapting and finally sustaining the learning organisation.

Ortenblad (2007), asking what more we need to know about the learning organisation, identifies four distinct notions of what the concept of a learning organisation can stand for: learning at work; a climate for learning; organisational learning, and a learning structure. A fifth notion, 'new organisational learning' is also described. He distinguishes between three unique perspectives: that of the employer, that of the employee and that he refers to as the societal perspective. After providing this concise summary of the learning organisation literature, Ortenblad (ibid) concludes that there are in fact 30 different adaptations of the learning organisation that can be implemented.

Finger and Brand (1999) discuss the application of the learning literature to public sector organisations. They propose that while change is a given in private sector organisations, in the public sector it is not so straightforward. They point to the double challenge facing public sector organisations at this time –increasing targets and competition, and the erosion of the nation state – and propose that to meet these challenges public sector organisations need to develop collective learning capacity and become learning organisations. This argument is relevant to many public sector social work organisations, which are increasingly subject to changes in job roles and tasks (GSCC 2008).

Considering these obstacles facing the public sector, and indeed other challenges and obstacles such as changes in job roles, which Finger and Brand (1999) overlook, it would be difficult to

consider learning in these organisations as a purely technical process (Argyris 1978). The social perspective, which also encapsulates the world outside the organisation, is visible here. The LPR case study research is based around notions that trade unions are not obstacles to but rather advocates of learning for organisations in the public sector.

The sociological perspective on the learning organisation has been discussed more recently by Gould (2004) with regard to social work organisations. While acknowledging the relatively recent emergence of the learning organisation literature during the 1990s, he discusses the longer tradition of literature theorising the relationship between the structure of organisations and their behaviour. He points to the works of Weber on bureaucracy and later to the scientific views stemming from Fordism and Taylorism and their critique by the human relations movement in the 1960s and '70s (for further information refer to the key theorists Taylor, 1911, Antonio and Bonanno, 2000 and Mayo, 1949).

As noted in the introduction to this review, there has been and continues to be confusion in the way in which the terms 'learning organisation' and 'organisational learning' are employed in the literature. Gould (2004) asks 'whether there are real differences between the managerialist slogans of 'organizational learning' (the processes through which learning takes place) and the 'learning organization' (the characteristics of an organization that learns) (p3). Gould (ibid) argues that there is a broad overlap between these two concepts and identifies two shared premises on which they are based: first, that individual learning is a necessary but not sufficient condition for organisational learning, and secondly, that:

'the learning experience is more pervasive and distributed than that delivered through a specific, designated training or educational event; learning incorporates the broad dynamic of adaptation, change and environmental alignment of organizations, takes

place within multiple levels within the organization, and involves the construction and reconstruction of meanings and world views within the organization.’ (p3)

Here however, Gould (ibid) appears to have ignored the wider influence that individual training could have on the organisation. The benefits of work-based learning programmes, not just to the individual employee but to the whole organisation, are well-documented (e.g see Clarke 2003, Davies and Bynner 1999); and Eraut et al (1998) remark upon the important role of formal planned learning in organisations.

The application of the learning organisation literature to the public sector is dated by Taylor (2004) to the late 1990s with its appearance in New Labour’s modernisation agenda, which drew upon the lifelong learning discourse and an assumption that this could be achieved through the creation of learning organisations (ibid). However, Pedler et al’s (1990) *Self Development in Organizations* indicates that research into public sector learning organisations had been carried out in the 1980s. At this time theorists such as Edmonstone (1990) wrote about the application of the concept of the learning organisation to the public sector with a particular focus on management competencies and development, and to managers’ changed expectations in terms of education and training in the public sector workplace.

Academic interest in the concept of the learning organisation and its applicability to the public sector continued to gain strength throughout the 1990s. A focus on the transferability of the concept to the public sector can be found in a collection of writings edited by Cook et al (1997). Cook et al (1997, p21) highlights limitations to the Investors in People award: ‘Its focus on training as opposed to learning (quite correct in itself) is not the total approach needed to develop organizational learning...How is learning (outside of formal training)

measured in this same way?’ So in addition to addressing the concept of the learning organisation for public sector organisations, Cook (ibid) also discusses the difficulties of recognising and rewarding informal learning. This is discussed in depth later in this chapter under workplace learning.

Summarising the work of Gould (2004) and others, Baldwin (2004) concludes that there is no evidence to suggest that social care organisations have become fully functioning learning organisations, although he states that ‘encouragingly [there are] indications that aspects of the learning organisation are appearing in some organisations.’ (p168).

In January 2005 the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) launched its first training resource. This included a learning organisation self-assessment resource pack designed ‘to enable social care organisations to assess whether they are a learning organisation (an organisation that uses evidence-based practice and evidence informed decision-making) and to help them move towards a learning culture’ (SCIE 2004). The aim of distributing this resource pack online was to improve human resource management practices which SCIE had identified as underdeveloped in social care organisations and which could lead to improvements in performance and staff morale and help to achieve effective recruitment and reduce staff turnover.

SCIE’s (ibid) definition of a learning organisation, on which the resource pack is based, points to the use of evidence-based practice and informed decision making as the key to making social care organisations learning organisations. This definition seems very limited considering the many definitions of a learning organisation identified and discussed earlier in

this chapter.

In the resource pack the following 12 key characteristics of a social care organisation learning organisation are identified:

**Organisational structure**

1. Service user and carer feedback and participation are actively sought, valued and resourced and used to influence and inform practice.
2. Teamworking, learning and making the best use of all staff skills are integral to the organisation.
3. There is cross-organisational and collaborative working.

**Organisational culture**

4. There is a system of shared beliefs, values, goals and objectives.
5. The development of new ideas and methods is encouraged.
6. An open learning environment allows learning from mistakes and the opportunity to test out innovative practice.
7. Messages from research and new evidence are thought about and incorporated into practice.

**Information systems**

8. There are effective information systems for both internal and external communication.
9. Policies and procedures are meaningful and understood by everybody (based on a human rights and social justice approach).

**Human resource practices**

10. There is continuous development for all staff including a clear supervision and appraisal policy.

**Leadership**

11. There is capacity for the organisation to change and develop services over and above day-to-day delivery.
12. Leadership at all levels embodies and models the key principles of a learning organisation.

(SCIE 2004)

What attempts have been made by social care organisations to assess whether they are a



learning organisation since SCIE's introduction of the learning resource? Have they made any progress towards become learning organisations or implementing organisational learning? The literature on this is limited. There are, however, examples of where the development of a learning organisation or learning culture in the public sector has been assessed. Wallis and Stuart (2007) conducted a qualitative study of workplace learning agreements. They carried out detailed case studies in six English workplaces where there were learning agreements between trade unions and employers, and conclude that 'the best outcomes in terms of the trajectory of employee participation in learning and the development of workplace learning cultures are associated with learning partnerships in which there is a relatively even balance of power between employers and unions' (p3). The six cases include private and public sector organisations, one of which was a city council.

Wallis and Stuart's (ibid) assessment of the city council revealed that from the perspective of management the learning agreement was viewed as symbolic rather than significant. However, they note the agreement's success in leading to the establishment of a learning centre and the provision of basic skills and IT courses for staff who had received little formal training in the past. Wallis and Stuart (ibid) propose that these activities had thus resulted in 'a fledgling learning culture within the Town Depot and in improved relations between management representative and the Combined Unions' (p38).

Thus far the literature review has focused on the contrasting theories in the learning organisation literature, and in particular the discussion has rested on the assumption that the process of organisational learning and the learning organisation are ideals that social care organisations or any organisation should be seeking to achieve. This has been contested:

Gould (2004) names several established criticisms of the learning organisation literature. This includes the work of Driver (2002), who critically discusses the evolution of two opposing research communities, one for which the learning organisation is a dreamlike ideal and the other for which it is a nightmare, to reach middle ground where the two perspectives can be combined.

Coopey (1998) sees these two opposing views as a contrast between the learning organisation's promise of 'Utopian sunshine' with that of 'Foucauldian gloom'. The utopian view of the learning organisation is that it is an antithesis to the traditional bureaucratic organisation (Driver 2002). Here the learning organisation enables egalitarianisation and the distribution of power through the knowledge of members of the organisation at all levels. The 'Foucauldian gloom' perspective has been used to criticise the positive view, and the 'liveable reality' is questioned. Coopey (1998) does not believe either of these perspectives to be accurate and warns that the learning organisation should be approached with critical awareness, which could be a positive force for increasing democratisation in social organisations.

Despite this criticism of the learning organisation literature the benefits of its application to social care organisations are outlined by Baldwin (2004), who concludes with the argument that 'the learning organization is a useful concept for analysing social care organizations around the world. The concept gives pointers to what an effective social care organization might look like as well as a tool for critically evaluating how much they currently are' (p175). He argues that initiatives and changes that have recently taken place in social work education such as the introduction of the degree qualification highlight why social care organisations

should maximise individual learning as a catalyst for learning at the organisational level.

### **Work-based Learning**

Having looked at learning organisations we now turn to the idea of work-based learning, which Gould (2004) calls attention to. In recent years there has been renewed interest in work-based learning, with numerous publications on the subject. Many of these, like the literature on the learning organisation, are based on corporate case studies, but there are others, such as those based on health care and schools. This rise is purported to have resulted from global competition and an era where rapidly shifting environments call for adaptive responses by organisations in order that they survive (Marsick 2006), and in the case of the public sector, to provide adequate services. , Marsick and Volpe (1999) argue that for organisations to adapt and be competitive, former training and education are insufficient and managers need to 'unleash creativity and innovation' (p2).

Two key types of work-based learning are distinguished in the academic literature: formal and informal learning. Marsick and Watkins (1990) argue: 'Formal learning is typically institutionally sponsored, classroom-based, and highly structured. Informal learning, a category that includes incidental learning, may occur in institutions, but is not class room based or highly structured, and control of learning rests primarily in the hands of the learner.' The present research objectives incorporate an exploration of both of these types of learning in the case study organisation. The LPR arguably incorporates aspects of both formal and informal learning. Practice workshops offered as part of the programme are clearly examples of formal learning; other aspects of distance learning, such as studying OU material in the home, share aspects of both formal and informal learning. To some extent these materials are

formalised and structured through timetables and deadlines; however, control of this learning in the home rests primarily in the hands of the learner.

Rainbird (2004, p3) argues that 'most workplace learning occurs through everyday working practices'. In a discussion on informal learning in the workplace, Marsick (2006) outlines the nature of informal learning and distinguishes between two types: strategic and non-strategic. She provides a description of strategic learning in the workplace and defines this type of learning as that which 'is recognised and utilised to move the organisation towards its objectives'. However, no contrasting description and exploration of non-strategic informal learning is given.

Marsick and Volpe (1999) summarise themes identified through a number of studies into informal learning and argue that informal learning comprises the following characteristics:

- it can be integrated with work and daily routines
- it can be triggered by an internal or external jolt
- it is not highly conscious
- it is often haphazard and influenced by chance
- it is an inductive process of reflection and action and is linked to the learning of others.

Marsick (2006) discusses informal learning further and identifies other characteristics that make it more effective, including when partners come together to solve problems and then modify practices or rules to prevent problems from reoccurring. She also draws on previous work when discussing instances when informal learning is unsuccessful (ibid). Barriers identified include resources, structures and culture. An example of this is where an agency or

individual professional is not open to or will not take into account the views of others. Marsick also highlights the potential problem in informal learning when employees do not fully understand what they have learnt. She argues: 'Informal learning may suffer from its very strength, that is, that it takes place almost unconsciously as people meet the demands that require the acquisition of new mental models, knowledge and skills'(ibid, p57).

Indeed, in order to be fully achieved, does informal learning need at some point to become a conscious process? In a discussion on informal and incidental learning Marsick and Watkins (2001) appear to indicate that informal learning may be either conscious or unconscious: 'When people learn incidentally, their learning may be taken for granted, tacit or unconscious. However a passing insight can then be probed and intentionally explored' (p26); but they make no firm conclusions. They do however propose three conditions in which informal learning may be enhanced. First, through critical reflection to bring tacit knowledge to the surface; second, where an individual actively identifies options and learns new skills that will enable the learner to implement those options or solutions; and thirdly, where creativity is encouraged. Alongside this, Marsick and Watkins (ibid) argue that social and cultural norms should not be overlooked as these influence all stages of the learning process, including interpretation and action.

Marsick and Watkins (ibid) conclude by arguing that informal and incidental learning are the most pervasive forms of adult learning and can be enhanced through formal learning, i.e. educational intervention. They contend that formal adult learning 'may also be enhanced if adult educators heed the lessons learned informally and incidentally' (p32). Should not both educators and learners heed the lessons learnt from informal learning to enhance formal

learning? Also, what is the relationship between formal and informal distance learning? To what extent does formalised distance learning such as practice workshops enhance the informal distance learning which rests in the hands of the learner? Or is it the informal learning resulting from studying the distance learning social work programme that enhances formal distance learning situations, as Marsick and Watkins (ibid) propose?

The processes by which informal learning is brought to consciousness have been explored and theorised. Schon (1983) proposes reflection in action and reflection on action as one such theory. This process is also illustrated in Nonaka and Takeuchi's (1995) knowledge creation cycle through explicit (articulated) and tacit (implicit) knowledge.

Marsick (2006) outlines the following as instances that initiate informal learning

- problem solving
- action learning
- bench marking
- reward schemes
- punishment
- risk taking

It would be useful to know whether these processes are thought to be related to learning by employees at the case study social care organisation.

The link between informal learning and the learning organisation is made by Mumford (1996) in his learning pyramid (see Figure 1.1, p14. Mumford (ibid) reviews several books relating to

learning organisations and suggests that whilst the learning organisation may be an ambition for many, line managers may reject this enthusiasm, worried that it may lead to their own position in the organisation being challenged or competed for. Interestingly, in his learning pyramid Mumford (ibid) highlights one-to-one learning, which, he believes, is not considered by either Senge (1990) or Watkins and Marsick (1990), who focus their thoughts around the learning organisation on team learning. In the learning pyramid the learning organisation is seen as the organisation's final objective.

Earlier in the discussion various obstructions to informal learning were identified. These include resources, structures and culture, as identified by Marsick (2006), and, more specifically, where an agency or individual is not open to the views of others or when a goal of a learning organisation is not shared by all employees in the organisation (Mumford 2006). Mumford (2006) points to the significance of having line managers on board.

The role of the line manager or supervisor in workplace learning has also received more recent attention. Macneil (2001) discusses the role of supervisors in promoting informal learning and argues: 'Creating effective change in an organisation using a positive learning environment, which will promote informal learning in work teams, will require an increase in the use of line managers as facilitators' (p250), and suggests that it is the 'supervisor as facilitator who provides the link between individual and organisational learning' (p251). This can be contrasted with Marsick's (2006) definition of informal learning, in which control of informal learning rests primarily in the hands of the learner.

Macneil (2001) discusses a number of barriers that may result from relying on the line

manager for such a crucial role in the learning of teams: these include heavy workloads, lack of communication from senior management, underdeveloped coaching skills, a reluctance in line managers who see their own position threatened by developing staff and the potential for the latter's own personal goals to take precedence over the team goals.

Gibb (2003) discusses further advantages and disadvantages of reliance on line management for learning and development in organisations. One purported advantage of involving line management is that learning will be more equally spread throughout the organisation and will involve employees with a range of educational backgrounds, thus enabling broad organisational change rather than individual pockets of learning and development activity. Gibb (ibid) recognises two contrasting views of the significance of the line manager's responsibility for learning; the minimalist view, which sees it as a small evolution of their management role, and a maximalist position in which this changing role of the line manager has profound significance and represents continuing transformation. Despite also recognising the disadvantages already discussed, Gibb (ibid) believes that his review and analysis suggests that greater 'involvement of line managers as developers can provide mutual satisfactions for organisations, for managers and for learners'.

As the line manager is seen as a key factor in both implementing and inhibiting individual learning within organisations, the role of line management in formal and informal learning in the case organisation is explored in the research interviews.

### **Introducing Learning Network Theory**

Early ideas about learning and training in organisations were very much focused on a



functionalist view; that is, that any training or learning by employees primarily met the needs of the organisation and the employee's specific job skills requirements. Since the 1990s, however, with increasing globalisation and the emergence of the knowledge economy, learning and training have been approached in alternative ways (see, for example, Sutherland and Rainbird 2000; Gould 2004). Krogst (1995) attempts to explain LNT as organisational learning through the perspectives of the actors involved and dependent on the individual organisational context, as opposed to a functionalist tool or independent of context.

Learning network theorists have proposed that empirical research conducted by training professionals have not enabled learning programmes to be tuned to the workplace, nor explained the variance in the effectiveness of such training programmes (Poell and Krogst 2006). They contend that there should be a new direction for theory and research in this area and that the diversity of relations among people in the work environment is deserving of greater attention. LNT is thus argued in an attempt to provide a theoretical framework for the study of learning in the work place. The following account of Poell and Krogst's work provides a brief overview of the origins of the theory and their earlier work before their most recent work is discussed.

Poell and Krogst (ibid) succinctly explain LNT in *Learning at the Workplace Reviewed: Theory Confronted with Empirical Research*. They argue that learning and development are processes that 'happen less systematically and less consciously than assumed' (p71), and propose a theory of work-based learning built on the core premises of three different learning theories; structural, actor and cybernetic systems. Krogst (1998) lists these three theories as deserving greater attention, and elements of each are incorporated into the learning network

approach. Some of them have been discussed earlier in this chapter.

The systems element of LNT is detailed as drawing upon systems analysis, and more specifically on cybernetic systems theory. In the learning network theory of learning in organisations, the organisation itself is seen as a whole, and the 'learning system' is understood to be a subsystem. When combined with the work system, according to Krogt (1998), it constitutes the environment of the learning system.

The second set of theories that LNT draws upon quite heavily are the actor theories of social constructivism and actor politics in which, in sharp contrast to systems theories, individuals are seen as rational actors with a central role. The actor politics perspective incorporates the conflicts, compromises and coalitions that emerge in the attempt to shape the learning structure. Krogt (ibid) identifies the role not only of managers, trainers and employees but also of trade unions in this process. As a result the 'learning systems are to a certain extent the outcome of the balance of power between actors within and around the organisation' (p161).

The final set of theories on which Krogt (ibid) draws are the structural theories of functionalism and contingency theory. Followers of this approach view learning as a function that the organisation must implement to improve the organisation and survive. Contingency theorists, in contrast, do not often apply their notion of an effective structure and a 'fit hypothesis' to learning systems (Krogt ibid). However, Krogt outlines the potential usefulness of these in 'pointing out where structures are appropriate for which types of work, thus providing useful guidelines for redesigning structures' (p159). In a description of LNT Krogt (ibid) outlines the link between the systems- and actor-based theories, arguing that 'network

structures come about as the result of the actors' actions but the structure in turn influences those actions' (p163).

This amalgamation of theories in LNT potentially provides a strengthened approach to workplace learning as the strengths from the three different disciplines can be combined. The ontologies of the theories are also combined. Easterby-Smith (1997) outlines six different disciplines and their corresponding ontologies (see p39 Table 2.1). Here lies another potential problem with LNT. If several academic theories derived from disciplines with conflicting ontologies are combined, this must be a point at which LNT is unconvincing.

To extend his learning theory to that of a networking perspective, Krogt (1998) incorporates the 'network perspective on organising'. The chosen network perspective 'means that any organization is conceived of as a network of actors who interact and shape the structure. Actors create organisations by interacting and they do so on the basis of their action theories and their positions in the network' (p163).

In *Learning Network Theory: Organizing the Dynamic Relationships between Learning and Work* Poell et al (2000) discuss LNT in relation to contemporary work-related learning issues. They recognise the popularity of the term *learning organisation* and the challenges facing organisations in terms of a move from Tayloristic principles to the flexibility and adaptability required by the current economic climate and the fast-paced changes that they face.

In outlining LNT as an interpretive framework Poell et al (ibid, p32) claim:

There is a need for a theoretical framework that regards organizing work related learning differently. One that acknowledges employees as central actors who co-

organize learning on the basis of their ideas and interests, instead of reducing their participation to being at the receiving end of a training course. One that regards multiple ways of organizing work-related learning not only as a didactic principle, but as an expression of the various organising strategies used by the employees and other actors in order to learn. One that recognizes the immanent tensions between learning and work between employee development and work performance, instead of viewing learning simply as functional for work. One that reduces the danger of creating a learning elite by enabling people to adjust work to their qualifications as well as to adapt their competencies to work innovations.

The rest of the article addresses the question of whether this theory can meet the needs outlined in the above quote. These needs were identified from a review and critique of several theories on work-based learning, in particular functionalism, which they identify as the most prominent in this area. I focus here on a description of LNT and the key premises upon which it is based. This is of vital importance, as LNT is utilised in interpreting the LPR case study data.

Poell et al (ibid) state that LNT is based upon the following key premises:

- a learning network is operating in every organisation;
- learning networks are not limited to a particular type of organisation;
- people learn in every type of organisation and the learning network represents how this learning is organised;
- LNT is not related to computer or interorganisational networks;
- LNT consists of the various learning activities organised by the members of the organisation and is based upon three key components.

The theory has been useful in the interpretation of how learning has been organised the

learning partnership activity with UNISON. However, Poell et al's (ibid) premise states that LNT is not related to interorganisational networks, and in my case study, understanding the dynamics of the organisation's relationship with UNISON and the resulting impact on learning in the case organisation are key research objectives. The three components of LNT are identified as the learning actors, the learning processes that they organise and the learning structures that they create. In their further discussion of the learning actors, Poell et al (ibid) state that this can also include external actors, such as trade unions. So from this perspective the relationship between UNISON and the case organisation can be seen as one of learning actors as opposed to an interorganisational network.

Looking at the relationship between the learning network of the case study organisation and work, or the so called 'labour network', may be valuable in terms of seeing how learning activity between the partners may impact on work policies, programmes, content, relations and climate. Poell et al (ibid) conclude that LNT 'is a descriptive and interpretative model of how learning can be organised rather than a prescriptive model' (p42). So the theory's strength may lie in assisting an understanding of the current learning processes in the case study organisation. However, my view, acknowledged in part by the authors, is that the model is an oversimplified version of reality.

Poell et al (ibid) go on to describe the different types of learning networks and their relationship to the work processes and structures. First they describe the liberal learning network: here individual employees are empowered and the learning policies and networks are individually orientated. The vertical learning network involves linear planning of learning activities and the organisational structure is centralised and dominated by management. The

third learning network is horizontal and is found in organisations characterised by egalitarian relationships with no predesigned learning policies, which instead develop through learning from current programmes and activities. Finally, the external learning network, as the name suggests, is coordinated from outside the organisation and the learning programmes adopted result from innovations that emerge from the professional field. The authors point out that LNT does not rest on the assumption that an organisation's learning network will fit neatly into one of the four types, as it will have the characteristics of more than one type.

A question to ask about LNT theory is how and when it has been used by researchers in practice. Poell et al (ibid) provide in-depth accounts of the exact nature of the theory and its link to other theories of work-based learning. However, to gauge the value of the theory in understanding the case study organisation it is necessary to see how it has been put into practice. Most recently the theory was tested by Pahor et al and is reported in their article 'Evidence for the Network Perspective on Organisational Learning' (2008).

Pahor et al (ibid) identify two perspectives in the literature on work-based learning: acquisition and participation. They argue that LNT incorporates both perspectives, recognising the individual as the primary source of learning whilst acknowledging that the site of learning is often social interaction. They conducted a social network analysis in two companies and conclude that their findings support for the network perspective on organisational learning, arguing:

The results presented in this article stress the importance of key individuals in the network. However, it is not just the individuals that are important; it is also the context in which the learning network emerges that is of crucial importance. Companies that

wish to promote organizational learning should nurture the different contexts in which the learning network emerges. (p193)

Whilst Pahor et al (ibid) claim to have provided evidence for the network perspective and have paid particular attention to LNT, they only apply social network analysis as a means of investigation. LNT is, however, distinct from social network analysis and other network perspectives. Poell et al (2000) do not advocate the use of this method to explore the learning networks in organisations. They report the use of LNT as a frame of reference to describe and explain how work-related learning projects are organised, thus going further than social network analysis, as the action theories of the individuals are also collected as data as part of the research method (Poell 2006).

LNT is potentially a useful tool for the description and interpretation of learning in an organisation. Yet little published research claims to apply the theory to real-life examples, and there is no detailed information about the method by which this can be achieved. Poell et al (2009) offer one example of LNT being utilised in a comparative multiple-case study of two learning projects. They give a short description of the application of the theory and outline and how this was achieved through coding each of the interviews against the elements of the conceptual lens. Following the application of the theory to the data they argue that this 'perspective is basically analytic and descriptive in nature, aiming to understand how learning is organized in different organizational types' p86).

The theory does seem to provide an alternative way of thinking about workplace learning and the many actors involved, not just those within the workplace or specific learning

environments. Despite this advantage, will the application of the theory lead to the ‘oversimplified version of reality’ that the authors caution against? They claim that this theory is merely a descriptive and interpretive tool, (an heuristic<sup>3</sup>); but to place an organisation into one of the four specified learning networks calls for a certain amount of analysis and assessment by researchers.

Alternative approaches to the analysis of learning in organisations take their position from Lave and Wenger’s notion of ‘a community of practice’, that this is ‘set of relations among persons, activity and world...an intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge’ (1991, p98). This communities of practice approach led academics away from the previous concentration on learning as a solely cognitive formal experience, to an understanding of learning which encompasses informal learning experiences in a range of practice settings with unplanned social interaction and activity (Fuller et al 2005). A key criticism aimed at Lave and Wenger’s approach is described by Fuller and Unwin (2003) and they explain that ‘it does not include a role for formal educational institutions in the newcomer’s learning process. Indeed, the formal, off-the-job educational components referred to in the...case studies are seen either to add little to the process of learning via legitimate peripheral participation in a community of practice, or, even, as having a detrimental effect’ (p408).

Fuller & Unwin (2003), Unwin (2004) and Evans et al (2006) move away from the concept of the learning organisation to a restrictive versus expansive framework (see Appendix A) to outline one way in which the quality of learning environments may be analysed and assessed. This framework of workplace learning environments is used to assess specific characteristics

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<sup>3</sup> The theory and practical application of techniques for solving problems approximately that cannot be solved exactly. *J Heuristics* (2009) <http://www.springer.com/math/applications/journal/10732>



such as the availability of qualifications and support for employees. Through application of the framework it is possible to identify to what extent a workplace is either an expansive or restrictive learning environment. The expansive/restrictive continuum is for application to specific workplaces and learning environments in one organisation and does not easily lend itself to analysis of a partnership learning network involving more than one organisation. It may be possible for each organisation's learning environment to be placed along the continuum; however, the case study data do not provide enough detailed evidence to address each of the features of the learning environment outlined. Also I wish to approach the analysis of the case study data without holding on to any framework or preconceptions of what illustrates formal and informal learning in the LPR.

### **Chapter Summary**

The main focus of this thesis is the nature of workplace learning in social care and the role of one trade union in a learning partnership with a social care organisation and the OU. This is achieved through the development of Learning Network Theory. This literature review has provided a background to the empirical research presented. The learning opportunities studied through this partnership case study call for a complex integration of academic literature from a number of areas including current and historic industrial relations in the UK, widening participation, the emergence of literature pertaining to the concept of the learning organisation, and workplace learning, in particular informal and formal learning. In addition to this literature Poell et al's work on LNT has been described before being used to further understand the dynamics of the case study partnership in question. The current political perspective on skills and learning are addressed, and the role of trade unions discussed in relation to learning opportunities and the LPR case study. Literature on the concepts of the learning organisation and organisational learning, and on workplace learning and LNT are outlined and reviewed.

### 3. Methodology

#### Theoretical Paradigms

The philosophical assumptions on which this research is based are outlined and discussed in this chapter. The philosophical basis of the methodology used was critical realism. The philosophy of social research is outlined and an explanation of the research and data collection methods used is presented. A clear summary of four basic belief systems and their alternative inquiry paradigms as provided by Christie et al (2000, p9) is shown in Table 3.1, below.

Critical realism has been discussed by a wide variety of academics in a number of disciplines. The ideas behind the approach stem from Bhaskar's writings on transcendental realism and critical naturalism. Bryman (2004) sees critical realism as an epistemology, whilst others discuss critical realism as first and foremost an ontological position (Kaboub 2007). Christie et al's (2000) summary of the work of Guba and Lincoln (1994) and Riege (1996) provides a clear and concise approach to critical realism uncovering the ontology<sup>1</sup>, epistemology<sup>2</sup> and methodologies which they see as associated with critical realism as a theoretical paradigm.

Christie et al (2000, p6) argue that critical theory, constructivism and realism are believed to be most appropriate:

for exploring complex social phenomena that require working with people and real life experiences and where the researcher seeks to understand the research problem by reflecting, probing, understanding and revising meanings, structures and issues.

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<sup>1</sup> Ontology is concerned with the study of existence and the categorization of existence, or rather for present purposes the assumptions about existence underlying any given approach to social research – see for example Russell (1980).

<sup>2</sup> 'Epistemology is concerned with providing a philosophical grounding for deciding what kinds of knowledge are possible and how we insure they are both adequate and legitimate' (Maynard 1994 p10)

**Table 3.1: Basis belief systems of alternative inquiry paradigm**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Positivism</b>	<b>Critical Theory</b>	<b>Constructivism</b>	<b>Realism</b>
<b>Ontology</b>	<b>Naive realism:</b> Reality is 'real' and apprehensible	<b>Historical realism:</b> 'Virtual' reality shaped by social economic, ethnic, political, cultural and gender values, crystallized over time	<b>Critical relativism:</b> Multiple local and specific 'constructed' realities	<b>Critical realism:</b> Reality is 'real' but only imperfectly and probabilistically apprehensible and so triangulation from many sources is required to know it
<b>Epistemology</b>	Objectivist: findings true	Subjectivist: value mediated findings	Subjectivist: findings created	Modified objectivist: findings probably true with awareness of values between them
<b>Common methodologies</b>	<b>Experiments/surveys:</b> Verification of hypothesis; chiefly quantitative methods	<b>Dialogic/dialectical:</b> Researcher is a transformative intellectual' who changes the social world within which participants live	<b>Hermeneutical/dialectical:</b> Researcher is a 'passionate participant' in the world being investigated	<b>Case studies/convergent interviewing:</b> Triangulation, interpretation of research issues by qualitative and/or quantitative methods (such as structural equation modelling)

Source: Based on Guba and Lincoln (1994), Riege (1996)

Critical realism can be contrasted with positivism where the data collection techniques implemented, such as experiments and surveys, are outcome-orientated and assume natural laws and mechanisms (Christie et al 2000). Subscribing to positivism would not fit the nature of the present case study, which assumes awareness of the values that the learning actors hold and of the impact this will have on the research findings. On the other hand, this research does not fit perfectly with a critical or constructivist paradigm, where the data are dependent upon the interaction between the researcher and the interviewer. As a researcher it is not my view that the case study findings are subjective and created or value mediated; I subscribe to a modification of the objectivist view. The research questions fit more comfortably with an epistemology which see the findings as 'probably true' but with an 'awareness of the values

between them' (Christie et al 2000), and for this reason I examine realism in further detail below.

For Bryman (2004, p12), realism has two commonalities with positivism: firstly 'a belief that the natural and social sciences can and should apply the same kinds of approach to the collection of data and to explanation', and secondly 'a commitment to the view that there is an external reality to which social scientists direct their attention (in other words there is a reality that is separate from our descriptions of it)'. The close link between positivism and realism are outlined by Christie et al (2000) as having an objectivist epistemology and an ontology where reality is 'real', despite these two paradigms being located at the opposite ends of the belief systems paradigm. Those who follow a critical realist approach such as Porter (1993) seek out 'generative mechanisms' which we are not able to directly observe but are, however, realised through their effects.

The focus of this research is the experiences of the learning partnership actors who have been subject to such 'generative mechanisms'. For example, we may analyse the light from a given star and deduce from the wavelength of its light the star's colour and thus the type of star, although we cannot directly observe the star itself. The star represents a generative mechanism which has definite effects, and from those definite effects we can characterise the nature of the star or at least make conjectures about it. By establishing the effects of the LPR it is hoped that the research will provide further knowledge and evidence informing the debates surrounding the role of trade unions in social work education and the importance of a learning organisation and culture.

### **Case Study Research**

## Defining and justifying the method

The previous section highlighted the realist nature of the research. In this case the ‘generative mechanism’ is not a physical object such as a star but rather a set of relationships within and between organisations. These effects can be conceptualised as forms of learning, typically informal or formal learning, and how they may characterise the nature of this case as organisational learning/learning organisation.<sup>3</sup> As a realist researcher, I could use a number of research methods to address the research objectives of capturing the reality of these relationships. As the learning partnership has been under way for a number of years the choice of method was limited to non-action or experimental methods and needed to be met by in-depth qualitative research to meet the ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions. Ethnographical methods could have captured real ‘natural’ relationships but would not have been practical. The research objectives call not only for an investigation of the current learning situation but also a reflection and description of the partnership over approximately the last seven years. So whilst using a method such as direct observation would have provided an insight into current informal and formal learning in the organisation, it would not have been possible to look at the role of UNISON in this process. Also the very nature of the partnership involves three separate organisations and a whole host of individual actors, in different geographical locations.

Another method which would have provided evidence on learning in the social care organisation would have been to survey the partnership actors and social care organisation employees. However, this would not have allowed for in-depth and reflective accounts of the role of UNISON. Also, whilst a survey could have been employed to quantify the learning opportunities available to the social care employees, it might have failed to uncover informal

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<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 2 for a discussion on the nuances and differences between organisational learning and the learning organisation.

learning opportunities. In the literature a number of characteristics and activities believed to lead to informal learning (Marsick and Watkins 2001) are identified. However, to utilise informal learning theory and to survey the employees would entail an assumption of what activities or processes lead to informal learning in the social care organisation. An in-depth qualitative account was employed to explore informal learning practices without imposing any preconceived ideas of what these might be.

Vennesson (2008) emphasises four key points that are raised in defining the case study method. One particularly important point here is the acknowledgement that the case definition is the result of the theoretical conceptualisation of the researcher.

First, the case is not just a unit of analysis or an observation, understood as a piece of data. It is not a data category, but a theoretical category. Second, the case is not *a priori* spatially delimited. The delimitation of the case, spatial or otherwise, is the product of the theoretical conceptualisation used by the researcher. These boundaries are by no means obvious or to be assumed: they result from the theoretical choices. Third, the phenomenon under study does not have to be contemporary; it can be from the past. Fourth, in case study research, data can be collected in various ways, and it can be both qualitative and quantitative. (ibid, pp226-227)

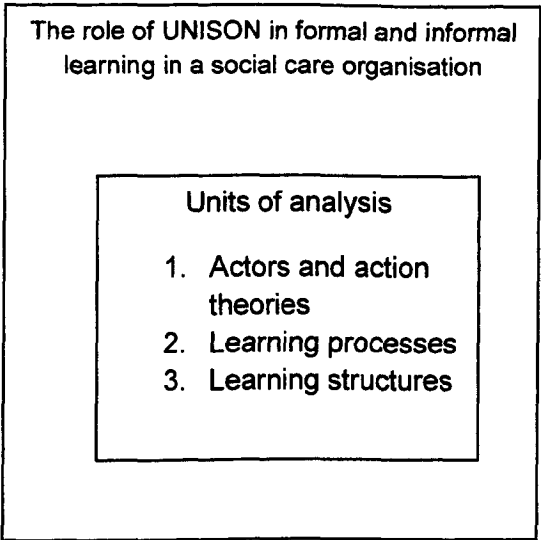
Vennesson (2008) outlines four main types of case study: *the descriptive case study*, which provides a description of phenomena with no indicated theoretical intention; the *interpretative case study*, in which theoretical frameworks are used to provide explanations of particular cases; *case studies that generate and refine hypotheses*; and *theory-evaluating case studies*, in which the case study is used to assess whether existing theories account for the processes and outcomes of the selected cases.

In this LPR case study a theoretical framework was used to provide explanations, describe, evaluate and refine. The case study thus has features of both the interpretative and descriptive case studies defined by Vennesson (2008) and reflects the fourth type of case study, as the case data are used to assess existing theories. The LPR case study appears to fit three of the four types of case study outlined, and thus I turn to Yin (2003, 2009) for a more concise approach to defining it.

Robert Yin (2003) discusses case study design and research methods in great depth. I have already justified the research design, and this further writing details the specific features of this case study. Two possible case study designs were considered for the research and also to identify how the case study was to be analysed, based on illustrations in Yin (2003) and sourced from the Cosmos Corporation (Yin 2003: p40). Four different case study design types based on a mixture of multiple versus single case and embedded versus holistic cases were considered. Figure 3.1, below, depicts an embedded single case design for the LPR research. Here the context of the case is the role of UNISON in formal and informal learning within the social care organisation. The actors, their action theories; the learning processes and learning structures form the units of analysis.



**Figure 3.1: Embedded single case design**



Yin (2003) argues that holistic case study designs are useful in circumstances where there are no logical subunits. In my research design there are clearly several units of investigation within the overlying case study of the role of UNISON. A holistic approach to the case may lead to limitations in the analysis identified by Yin (2003) such as failure to analyse the case in any operational detail, i.e. not gaining the micro perspective. On the other hand, it is important to recognise the potential problems of an embedded case study, in which a focus on the specific units of analysis may lead to neglect of the overriding case study. To prevent this I took several steps from the design stage through to the analysis which included ensuring that the research questions were kept visible and highlighted at each stage, and that the discussion incorporated a separate analysis of each unit of analysis which would lead back to the overriding case.

It may have been possible to conduct this research using a holistic multiple case design, but whilst I wanted to incorporate analysis on the role of UNISON, important knowledge could be

gained from looking at the units of analysis and the information they provided about UNISON's role in creating learning. Analysis was carried out on all units of analysis so that micro-level information and knowledge could be extracted, and this formed part of the overall case analysis.

### **The Units of Analysis**

Prior to choosing the research methods and the measures to employ to meet the research questions and objectives it was important to consider the different units of analysis that could be investigated. The following were identified in relation to exploring the role of UNISON in formal and informal learning in social care organisations. These units of analysis are taken from LNT (Poell et al 2000), as explained in principle in Chapter 2, and are further developed in Chapter 5.

- actors and their action theories
- learning processes (development of learning policies and programmes, and execution of learning programmes)
- learning structures (content and organisational structure and learning climate).

### **Sources of Evidence**

Six of the most popular sources of case study evidence cited by Yin (2009) are documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observation and physical artefacts, as previously mentioned. Documentation (including archival records) and interviews were used as the sources of evidence for this case study.

## Interviews

Eraut (2004) identifies interview studies as the most commonly-used research method for exploring informal learning in the workplace. Researchers use a variety of interview techniques to explore learning in the workplace; these include asking participant employees to give detailed accounts of their daily work practices and focusing the interview on critical incidents. Yin (2009) lists only two strengths of the interview as a source of evidence in case study research: they can be targeted to focus directly on the case study topics; and they may provide insights into causal inferences and explanation, thus meeting the needs of Vennesson's interpretative case studies. The weaknesses that Yin (ibid) cites are bias that may arise from poorly-articulated questions and the interviewee providing a response that they believe the interviewer wants to hear or that is expected. Another key problem Yin (ibid) listed is inaccuracy of the data due to poor recall of events and experiences. It was important to consider this weakness in the case study, which relied on the partnership participants accurately recalling the partnership and its resulting learning programmes. To counteract this potential weakness, supplementary evidence was gathered from documentation. Yin (2009) only briefly considers the interview and its usefulness as a source of evidence in case study research: I now consider it in greater depth as a research method.

Fontana and Frey (2005) acknowledge that interviews are a popular research method used for a range of functions including market research, opinion surveys and academic research. They highlight the emergence of an 'interview society' in the United States in their reflections on 'The Interview: From Neutral Science to Political Involvement'. The purpose of conducting an interview is defined by Patton (1990) as finding out 'what is on someone's mind....We interview people to find out from them those things which we cannot directly observe'. This is

one of the key reasons I employed interviews as the key research method. Observations of the learning processes in the organisation would have been one method that the research questions could have addressed; however, they would only have led to the current informal and formal learning in the organisation being explored and evidenced. Through observation alone it would not have been possible to identify UNISON's role in planning, implementing and evaluating the social work programmes.

Fontana and Frey (2005) discuss the history of the interview as a research method. They date the beginnings of the academic qualitative research interview to the work of the Chicago School. The methods employed by researchers at the Chicago School included reliance on observations, personal documents and informal interviews. In the 1950s, however, the qualitative accent of interviewing for academic research was beginning to be replaced by the use of interviews in survey research as a method that helped to quantify data. The quantification of interview data was not a novel concept in the world of research, as the use of interviews in market research and opinion poll data collection before then is well documented. The novelty lay in the move of this survey interview into the academic arena; Fontana and Frey (ibid) claim that this perspective on the interview method dominated academic sociology for the next three decades.

More recently post-modern ethnographers have concerned themselves with the implications of the control and power that the interviewer has over the interview process and outcomes, and the presence of underlying assumptions. Researchers who acknowledge the subjectivity surrounding the research process employ what Fontana and Frey (2005) describe as an 'empathetic approach'. They argue that these interviews are conducted from a more ethical

stance, advocating the role of the interviewer as a partner in the process. King et al (2002) take a similar approach to the role of interviews in academic research, arguing that the ‘interview is bound in historical, political, and cultural moments and that as those moments change, so does the interview’. Fontana and Frey (2005) refer to King et al’s (2002) work as radical work which they believe has collapsed ‘decades of objective interview findings’.

This distinction between the objective and the subjective interview parallels the use of interviews in quantitative research such as surveys, and those employed for qualitative research such as ethnographic studies. What draws the two approaches together is the common purpose of data collection.

Robson (2002) describes a common typology used to distinguish types of interview on the basis of the depth of the response sought:

1. The fully-structured interview: The interview questions and their order are predetermined with fixed wording.
2. The semi-structured interview: Whilst the questions are predetermined as in the fully-structured interview, this type of interview is more flexible and the question order and wording may be revised by the interviewer as appropriate in each interviewee situation.
3. The unstructured interview: This interview is the most flexible of the three. There are no predetermined questions, merely themes of interest to be explored.

Robson (2002) claims that semi-structured and unstructured interviews are usually associated with flexible qualitative research. From this it can be assumed that the fully-structured

interview can be connected with a quantitative approach.

In addition to the distinction between structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews, Robson (2002) describes a further means by which interviews may be classified: whether or not they consist of open or closed questions. When closed questions are asked the interviewee is forced to choose between two or more fixed alternative answers. With open questions there is no limitation on the reply that the respondent may make. This open approach is said to produce a greater depth of response (ibid). This type of interview is one that is usually associated with qualitative research. Robson (ibid) points to a number of advantages of this approach for the researcher, including the fact that during this type of interview it is easier for the interviewer to clear up any misunderstandings, and he highlights the benefits of co-operation and flexibility in encouraging the establishment of rapport between the interviewer and interviewee, in contrast to closed-question interviews where the interviewee's response can only be positioned on a predetermined scale. The differences noted here between the closed- and the open-questioned interview often reflect whether the researcher is at the positivist or the interpretive end of the scale and whether qualitative or quantitative data are sought.

As Robson (ibid) describes, the type of interview conducted will be reflected in the type and nature of, and the context in which, data are gathered during an interview. In planning the case study it was important to also consider the practicalities of using an interview method to gather data. The practical advantages and disadvantages of these interview types are listed (ibid). But whilst difficulties such as limitations to money and time and establishing rapport are indeed important considerations for researchers, these are not the only variables that shape

interview practice. Conducting a telephone interview survey of social work degree students proved feasible without having to conduct face-to-face interviews and establish rapport.

Interviews with participants in higher level management positions in the case study's social care organisation, however, required a greater investment in terms of time. Sometimes several meetings with participants were required to establish rapport and gain trust before the formal interview could proceed.

Price (2002) argues that 'the research paradigm employed by the researcher is at least as important as the contextual difficulties of conducting interviews in the field' (p273), and lists the philosophical considerations which influence interview practice: ontology, epistemology, inquiry, deduction or induction and the data analysis process. Price (ibid) considers the influence of research paradigms in the research design as problematic, as they influence the practical ways in which an interview is carried out. Interviewing is 'profoundly influenced by the research philosophy' (ibid, p274). In the context of this critical realist case study research, the interview proved a suitable research method not only to obtain the relevant data from participants but also to ascertain the value and credibility of the findings.

A preliminary research survey was carried out via telephone interviews with OU social work students. A semi-structured, predominantly closed-question interview schedule was utilised. The interviews carried out during the case study research were based on a semi-structured interview schedule and open questions, further details of which are given in the Measures section. It was hoped that while the interviews were slightly structured, in that there was an outline of topics to be covered, there was room for in-depth insights and for the interview participants to talk at length about the topics without too much restriction or steering from the

researcher, thus providing qualitative insights and enabling the exploration necessary to meet the research objectives.

### **Documentary Evidence**

Documents were used as an additional source of evidence. They were collected from the interviewees before, during and after the interviews. The types of document provided by the participants included:

- email correspondence
- minutes of meetings
- internal reports
- formal studies and evaluation reports
- news clippings
- organisational structure and process figures.

Yin (2009) argues that documentary information ‘is likely to be relevant to every case study topic’ (p101). The main use of this source of evidence is in data triangulation, with the documents used to corroborate and augment evidence from the interview data. In addition to this they provide evidence for areas that are difficult to fully understand and explore in the interview and clues for further investigation of the interview data. Yin (ibid) points out that one of the weaknesses of the use of this source of evidence in a case study is over-reliance on the source. For the purposes of this case study the documentary evidence was limited to documents provided by the interviewees in recognition that these would reflect the communication with the participants and their own objectives.



### Dealing with bias

Hammersley and Gomm (1997) address the issue of research bias. While they acknowledge that the notion of 'bias' in social research is commonly based on foundationalist epistemological assumptions such as the concept of objectivity, their conclusions are indicative of a growth in the threat of bias in the conduct of social research. If this is true, then the way qualitative researchers deal with bias in their research is of considerable importance.

The quantitative researcher attends to the issue of research bias with reference to the calculation of significance levels (ibid). Hammersley and Gomm explore how qualitative researchers deal with the issue of bias in a number of ways. They argue that they can ask one of two questions: how biases have impacted upon their research, or whose interests are served by bias in the research. The former question, they argue, tends to be most frequently employed by qualitative researchers. They give the example of the response of a qualitative researcher committed to a particular political position who may find some of his findings uncomfortable. Hammersley and Gomm concentrate their discussion on the meaning of the issue of bias to social researchers.

Whitley and Crawford (2005) recognise that 'a traditional critique of qualitative research is that it is subjective, anecdotal and highly prone to investigator bias'. Bias may creep into the data collection and analysis when a researcher's conscious or unconscious preconceptions about the research area have an effect on the research process and the way conclusions are drawn from the data. Whitley and Crawford describe a number of techniques that qualitative researchers can use to deal with the accepted potential for a high level of bias in their research: triangulation, respondent validation, and multiple coding of the data. These are steps that can

be taken during and after the research to minimise bias in the research process. In the present research, as detailed, methodological triangulation was employed through the use of both interviews and documentation as sources of evidence. Also the data was coded using both manual thematic and Nvivo coding.

Guba and Lincoln (1994) propose a set of criteria for the judgement of qualitative research that encompasses a range of issues as an alternative to the ‘traditional’ criteria associated with quantitative research and the positivist paradigm. The traditional criteria and corresponding issues they describe are detailed in Table 3.2.

**Table 3.2: Traditional and Alternative Criteria for judgement of research**

Traditional Criteria	Alternative Criteria
Internal validity	Credibility
External validity	Transferability
Reliability	Dependability
Objectivity	Confirmability

Guba and Lincoln’s (ibid) alternative criterion to internal validity, credibility, involves the researcher ensuring that the findings are credible in the eyes of the research participant. A consideration of generalisability by the qualitative researcher will enable him/her to determine how transferable to another setting the findings of the qualitative research are. Guba and Lincoln’s alternative criterion of dependability refers to the qualitative researcher’s need to account for the ever-changing context in which the research is carried out. Lastly, confirmability addresses the issue of objectivity. This involves an acceptance of the subjective

nature of qualitative research: having the accuracy of the research findings considered by another may help to identify the extent to which they can be considered objective.

The snowballing sampling strategy utilised in this research required consideration of these criteria set out by Guba and Lincoln (ibid), as I was exploring learning within the organisation from the perspective of those in charge of learning and involved in the partnership. This might have led to a distorted interpretation of the learning culture, as those not involved in learning were likely to be excluded from the sample. The triangulation of data helped to counteract this. The case study data were supplemented with feedback from some of the non-LPR social work degree students interviewed in the pilot survey.

In addition to data triangulation another technique was employed to increase the design quality. Records of the methodological decisions made during the research journey were kept. Anatas (2004) lists this approach as useful to researchers as it makes qualitative research decisions more conscious and carefully considered. Keeping a record of the methodological choices for the research was incorporated as part of the overall documentation procedure required as part of the supervision process. A summary of these decisions is presented below.

### **Record of methodological decisions**

The following four extracts from the supervision records illustrate the methodological decisions in process and how the case study research evolved.

#### *Supervision Meeting 08/08/08*

*Planning:* Planning activity was discussed & it was acknowledged that this is to be extended due to wait for research governance approval (extended through September) still awaiting a response due 11/08/08. Concerns around the difficulty in concealing the identity of the case organisation were discussed.

*Participant Recruitment & Data Collection:* Five interviews have been conducted so far and E.G. is happy with how these are progressing. The total number of interviews to be conducted was discussed it was agreed that 25 in depth interviews should be the target for data collection. Supervisors recommended that this activity cease at the end of October.

E.G. raised concern over obtaining approval from the selected social care organisation for the research and another approach was discussed. E.G. to contact second social care organisation and invite them to participate in the research.

*Data Analysis:* E.G. informed supervisors that she has begun coding the student interviews using Nvivo to analyse the data in a new light from the perspective of the current research questions. Supervisors suggested that E.G. add the new interview data alongside. It was agreed that for the following supervision E.G. would write 2-4 pages on emerging themes from the data.

#### *Supervision Meeting 19/09/08*

##### *Planning:*

E.G. still awaiting response from initial approach to social care organisation. Research proposal has now been submitted to second social care organisation for review.

##### *Participant Recruitment & Data Collection:*

Ten interview completed & a further 9 participants identified.

##### *Emerging Themes Document:*

The emerging themes document was discussed briefly. Supervisors recommended that whilst this type of writing was fine for clarification purposes, he recommended E.G. spend time putting the findings into context with the relevant literature

#### *Supervision Meeting 14/10/08*

##### *Planning:*

E.G. still awaiting response on revised proposal to initial social care organisation. Research governance approval received from application to second social care organisation. The difficulty in obtaining research governance approval from the initial social care organisation was discussed and it was decided that a single case study provided enough data.

##### *Participant Recruitment & Data Collection:*

11 interviews completed & 2 organised. 11 further participants identified.

##### *Method Document:*

Supervisors fed back their comments on the case study method piece. The two different approaches to the case study were discussed and it was agreed that the first design (embedded single case) to be the most appropriate for the case study research. Supervisors suggested that this type of writing as being useful for supervision. By doing this E.G. could put forward her ideas/ options and be provided with advice on the best way forward from supervisors.

*Bridging Workshop Attendance: Observation and Questionnaire:*

Elizabeth informed all that she has the opportunity to attend a student bridging workshop on 24<sup>th</sup> October following contact with the programme tutor. E.G. suggested that she use the opportunity to hand out a short questionnaire to the students to follow up on the findings from the student interviews and to ask additional questions about their learning in their workplace and future learning plans. M.D. & C.T. agreed that this was a good idea and M.D. suggested that in addition to this E.G. observe and take notes on the workshop to form extra data for the case study. C.T. agreed that this observation would provide further opportunity to explore the presence of the SCIE learning organisation characteristics.

*Supervision Meeting 06/11/08**Research Governance:*

All agreed that research will now focus on just the single case study- regardless of Research Governance.

E.G. raised a query which had come from one of the interview participants who wished to see and check their interview transcript. It was decided that it would ok for E.G. to provide this, but to ensure that further to this the participant has no involvement with the data.

*Participant Recruitment & Data Collection:*

15 interviews completed & 1 organised. 8 further participants identified.

Supervisors highlighted concerns that there is less than two months left before the end of the data collection period & it was recognised that E.G. would have more difficulty recruiting in the run up to the Christmas period. E.G. hopes to complete 10 further interviews.

**Measures**

The research interview technique employed in this research was to ask each of the participants to consider the SCIE Learning Organisation characteristics and how and to what extent, if any, they believed they were incorporated into the organisation. The characteristics are listed on page 45 The aim of the research was thus not to tackle the issue of informal and formal learning directly, as this was not the main focus of the research, although informal learning in the organisation was explored in investigating the SCIE characteristics and various aspects of the LPRSW in order to highlight where it is a conscious process in the organisation.

### **Sampling Strategies**

The pilot student survey was conducted using a random sample of 50 of the total 459 non-LPR students from England studying on the K113 course. They were all contacted by email and asked if they would be willing to participate in an interview. The sample was randomly selected by the OU Survey Office. The pilot study also incorporated a sample of LPR students who had already been identified by the Student Survey Panel and appropriate contact details provided. All 36 of these students were contacted by email and asked to participate. In total 16 student telephone interviews were completed. This initial piece of research was a scoping exercise conducted with a view to eliciting the main differences between the experiences of students studying for the regular social work degree with the OU and those studying on the LPR route, the results of which were used to formulate the case study objectives. A random sample of these students was sought in order to ensure the reliability and validity of results.

A long-established criticism of qualitative research is the lack of specific and detailed information provided by its authors about the methodology they have employed (Zaruba et al 1996). As qualitative research methods such as the in-depth semi-structured interviews were utilised for the case study, statistically representative samples were not sought. Zaruba et al (ibid) acknowledge that the key to the quality of the research design is making the details of how participants were both selected and recruited transparent. The selection of the site is also central to the sampling decision process. There is a range of sampling methods available to qualitative researchers including convenience and purposeful sampling techniques.

The site selected in this case study research was a social care organisation and two other organisations who have contributed to the LPR, namely the OU and UNISON. To gather data

for the case study from interviews required a purposeful sampling strategy. There would clearly be key individuals or learning ‘actors’ from each of the organisations who were involved in the planning and running of the partnership, and key individuals in charge of learning in the social care organisation itself.

Another factor which has to be considered when deciding on the sampling strategy in research is feasibility, as highlighted by Lee and Kolomer in their assessment of caregivers’ impulsive feelings to commit elder abuse (2007). They cite their choice of a non-probability purposeful sample as resulting from the infeasibility of carrying out a random sample of caregivers, as they were unable to get hold of a comprehensive list of caregivers’ names. In this part of the case study it was not feasible to employ a random approach to sampling, principally because of the low numbers of individuals involved in the partnership. Also, the objective of the case study was to explore learning within this particular social care organisation, and the unique role that UNISON has played, not to generalise from the findings.

## **Participants**

The population from which the sample for the main study was taken comprised employees at the case study social care organisation, UNISON and the OU, and other individuals identified as having played a part in the Learning Partnership. Seventeen interviews were carried out; thirteen face to face and four via telephone. The data also incorporated evidence from sixteen preliminary fieldwork telephone interviews carried out with OU Social Work degree students. Seven of these students were on the LPRSW degree. A summary of the case study participants can be found in Table 1.1 (p23).

Participants were identified through the snowball strategy approach. This was achieved by asking initial contacts to identify and provide contact details of others involved in the partnership. Telephone or email contact was then made, asking if they would be willing to participate in a face-to-face or telephone interview at their convenience.

### **Ethical Considerations**

OU research ethics procedures were followed and a successful application was made to the Human Participants and Materials Ethics Committee (HPMEC). This included an outline of the justification for the research and the ethical guidelines to be followed, as provided by the British Sociological Association (BSA). Several of the ethical considerations identified by the BSA were identified as key in this research, and these are detailed below together with how they were addressed.

Written consent was obtained from the face-to-face interviewees and verbally obtained from the telephone interviewees. An information sheet was provided to all participants prior to consent being obtained informing them that they could withdraw from the research at any stage. A copy of the information sheet and consent form can be found in the appendix.

Manual data were kept in a locked cabinet in the student research office. Most of the data, including interview notes and reflections, were stored on a computer with access controlled by password. All data, including the interview transcripts, were anonymised immediately, paying particular attention to names, locations and other identifying information. A password-protected key was used so that it was possible to keep track of information from the same individual and record basic information such as organisation and role. A retention and disposal



record was kept of all the case study data and details of the types of data being stored, their location and the date each file was destroyed (in accordance with the length of time permissible for storage under the data protection act). The Health and Social Care Faculty's Data Protection Officer was informed about this research and the resulting dataset.

This research did not require any deception of participants; all participants and participating organisations were fully informed of the purpose of the research project. It did not involve contact with children or other vulnerable groups. To debrief participants they were all given a copy of the information sheet to take away after the interview. It was not foreseen that any of the topics covered during the interview would be of a particularly sensitive nature: however, in the event of personal upset during the research process appropriate steps were taken to reduce harm and offer direction for further advice where necessary. Participants were informed that a summary of the research findings would be made available to them at the end of the project.

In addition to following the OU student ethical procedures and the application to HPMEC, approval for the research was needed from the social care organisation identified for the case study. It is a Department of Health requirement that all health and social care organisations have a research governance process (Department of Health 2005). It was important that the case study social care organisation was fully aware of the planned research and that the partnership participants identified through the snowball sampling and employed at this location had confidence in the research process and knew that their employers were aware of their potential participation. At the time of application (July 2008) this procedure involved the submission of a research proposal to the policy unit at the organisation. The proposal was

verbally approved in September 2008, and written confirmation was received in December 2008.

## **Methods of Data Analysis**

### **Thematic analysis and applying the interpretative framework**

The strategy used to analyse the case study data was the use of the theoretical propositions on which the research questions and objectives were based to guide the data analysis. Yin (2009) cites this as the most commonly-employed data analysis strategy in case study research. The strengths and weaknesses of a number of different approaches to workplace learning are discussed in the literature review in Chapter 2. The key theory utilised for this purpose is LNT (Poell et al 2000), a theory used in the literature to describe organisational learning and which uses the actors, structures and processes in learning projects to interpret and describe how learning is organised.

A number of different approaches were discussed in the previous chapter, including the work of the learning network theorists, Poell et al (2000) and Wenger, Fuller and Unwin (2003). The LNT approach was adopted for analysis of the case study data as it is an amalgamation of theories and potentially provides a strengthened approach to workplace learning as the strengths from three different disciplines (namely systems analysis, social constuctivism and structural theory) can be combined. The theory does seem to provide an alternative way of thinking about workplace learning and the many actors involved, not just those within the workplace or specific learning environments as has been the case with other approaches to workplace learning. Through application of this theory to the LPRSW I can test the usefulness

of the theory. Also I wish to approach the analysis of the case study data without holding on to any framework or preconceptions of what illustrates formal and informal learning in the LPR.

The strengths and weaknesses of LNT as a framework for the analysis of the LPR case study could not be assessed in any depth in the literature review because, as noted, the LNT has not been applied to many real-life circumstances and no evidence was found of its use in describing and interpreting a learning partnership; this is a limitation of the data analysis. A number of problems with the application of the theory were uncovered; for example the learning network theorists do not distinguish between collective and individual actors, which seems a necessary step for the application of LNT. In order to complete the data analysis this distinction was addressed (see Chapter 5). Besides the problems, a benefit of applying LNT to the LPR case study was how it uncovered the power relations between actors in the network when the types of learning network that the LPR case study represents were analysed.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter has described and examined the methodological choices made in order to address the research aims and objectives outlined in the introduction. The philosophical basis of the methodology employed, critical realism, was outlined. Following this, the case study research method, units of data analysis, sources of evidence, measures, sampling strategies, participants and ethical implications were defined and their choice justified. Lastly consideration was given to the data analysis. The context surrounding the LPR initiative is described and analysed in greater depth in the next chapter.

## **4. The Context of the Learning Partnership Route**

### **Introduction**

In the previous chapter, the literature review, the history of trade unions and their developing role in workplace learning were briefly discussed. In this chapter the context surrounding the LPR initiative is described and analysed in greater depth before proceeding to the application of LNT in Chapter 5. The first part of this chapter explores the development of trade union involvement in workplace learning through an analysis of the educational and political contexts, leading to the introduction of the LPR. The social care context of the case study is then looked at in greater detail to support an understanding of the implementation of the LPR and to increase understanding of why the initiative was taken forward. This is achieved through an insight into the employer's approach to training and development and the impact of the wider regulatory framework on the organisation. Lastly, drawing on evidence from the case study research, details are presented of when the partnership with the employer was first set up and how this initiative built on the trust established through earlier programmes delivered via the partnership.

### **Trade Unions and Workplace Learning**

Caldwell (2000) discusses the development of adult learning opportunities in the workplace and the employment and educational context in which these changes occurred. During the 1980s and '90s there was a move away from the traditional educational system towards 'a much more flexible, diverse and responsive approach to learning' (p245). The rise in workplace learning during this period was, according

to Caldwell, very significant. Workplace learning fitted the requirements of the new lifelong education approach.

Streeck (1989, 1994) also contemplates the move away from the traditional educational system and the economic and political significance of skills during the 1970s and '80s and the strategic role of trade unions at this time. The increasing trade union involvement in workplace skills is seen as a result of the change in the political and economic circumstances in the UK during these years (Streeck 1989). Streeck (ibid) states that in the 1970s demand management, distributive conflict, redistributive justice and extensive regulatory state intervention led to problems in the 1980s where not enough attention was paid to production, creating a need to restore competitiveness and efficiency through a higher skills input. He highlights the key role of trade unions in this process:

If a widespread, equal distribution of skills is becoming a precondition for economic success even for firms that are capable of generating a sufficient supply of work skills for themselves, then egalitarian interests on the part of trade unions in generalisation of advanced upgraded production patterns, in preventing social dualism and in defending the egalitarian elements of the European high-wage economy, may not only be compatible with the interests of capital, but their forceful articulation may be a precondition of such interests being realised. (Streeck 1989: p104)

With the advance of workplace learning came a tension between two different strands of development (Caldwell 2000). Some were taking a flexible attitude towards learning as a result of a vocationally-driven agenda reflecting the OECD's interpretations of the lifelong learning agenda for economic growth and development.

There was an alternative understanding of workplace learning in those with a humanistic understanding of lifelong learning who emphasised learning for personal development, for example the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (Caldwell 2000).

Aspin and Chapman (2001) discuss this tension between the differing motivations for lifelong learning. They argue that lifelong learning is triadic in nature, with three central elements: lifelong learning for economic progress and development; lifelong learning for personal development; and third, something that Caldwell (2000) does not consider in isolation, lifelong learning for social inclusiveness. Aspin and Chapman (2001) see these as fundamental to building a more democratic political system and social institutions. The following quote from their paper 'Lifelong learning: Concepts, theories and values' encapsulates their arguments on the need to merge these three motivations for lifelong learning:

We need in these principles and ideals of social inclusiveness, justice and equity; an economy which is strong, adaptable and competitive; and a range of provision of activities which people choose for the rewards and satisfactions they confer. To bring this about a substantial reappraisal of the provision, resourcing and goals of education and training, and a major reorientation of its direction towards the concept and value of the idea of 'the learning society' is required. This is the major challenge for governments, policy-makers and educators as they seek to conceptualise lifelong learning and articulate policies to realise the aim of 'lifelong learning for all. (Aspin and Chapman 2001 p3)

Did trade unions help to reduce the tension outlined by Caldwell (2000) and bring together the perspectives on workplace learning? Arguably they have overcome some

of this tension through their bargaining agenda. Caudwell (ibid) describes how he believes that ‘unions can provide, or help to provide, learning opportunities for members, learning can be a fruitful area to develop workplace bargaining and the experience of learning can encourage union members to become more active in their work’ (p254). As Caldwell (ibid) describes, much union involvement in workplace learning stemmed from the movement towards access to further and higher education for all in line with the widening participation agenda outlined in the literature review chapter of this thesis. Unions, then, help to provide personal development learning opportunities for low-skilled employees whilst at the same time aligning with the priorities of employers through vocational skills development and encouraging employees’ renewed motivation for work.

The rise in trade union involvement emerged from three key developments (ibid); first, the changes which occurred with the rise of post-industrial society, namely a requirement for flexible working to meet an increasingly competitive market. These developments led to a decrease in job security for employees, and encouraged them to take more responsibility for their own learning. Alongside these changes came the election of the New Labour government in 1997, which brought about ‘the learning age’. With the introduction of three key initiatives: the University for Industry (UFI), which made basic skills a priority; Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs) which provided the funds for self-driven learning opportunities; and in addition to these initiatives, the Union Learning Fund (ULF) ensured a prime position for trade union involvement in workplace learning.



Caldwell (ibid) reflects on the reactions of private and public sector employers during this period. While stating that there was no clear pattern of response from employers, he notes that in the private sector, education and learning for employees had increased successfully in a number of companies aiming to improve workers' skills with an emphasis on the vocationally driven agenda, as opposed to the widening participation found under employers in the public sector. However, a case study looking at a union workplace learning partnership at British Telecommunications (BT) (Stoney 2002) provides evidence of a vocational and widening participation agenda in the private sector. A workplace learning BSc in Computer Science was developed in partnership between BT and the Communication Workers Union (CWU) to meet skills requirements within the company as 'in the UK, the BT workforce was halved between 1989 and 1998...while, at the same time, expanding into the 'new wave' areas such as mobile communications, data and the Internet. The BT management's response was motivated by a commitment to meet the skill requirements from within the existing pool of labour' (ibid: p62). Stoney (2002: p63) details how a 'philosophy of "diversity" underpinning the scheme' was also aimed at employees who had previously had access to higher education, as was the LPRSW degree.

Studies conducted by Munro & Rainbird (1997, 2000, 2004, 2010) reveal that UNISON has been at the forefront of negotiating employer learning partnerships to support workplace learning in the NHS trusts and other organisations. Evidence that they provide from their evaluations supports the argument that trade unions are able to positively bring together the range of interests in lifelong learning to provide successful learning and development opportunities for employees in the workplace.

This is in contrast to the noted potential dangers (McBride and Mustchin 2007) to the health service workforce of trade union/employer learning partnerships which might arise if partnership structures are used by management to drive reforms in their organisations. In such circumstances the learning partnership with trade unions could be used as a channel to legitimise reforms that run counter to the interests of staff.

A number of trade union and employer partnerships for workplace learning were introduced into the NHS as a part of the ‘skills escalator’ approach implemented by the Department of Health (ibid), designed to attract people to work for the NHS and encouraging all staff to review and extend their skills. Table 4.1, below, outlines the skills escalator approach taken forward by the NHS. The summary of levels 1 to 7 provided by McBride and Mustchin (ibid) details the categories of individuals targeted and their means of progression up the escalator.

**Table 4.1: The skills escalator approach**

<i>Level</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Means of career progression</i>
1	Socially excluded individuals	Six-month employment orientation programmes
2	The unemployed	Six-month placements in ‘starter’ jobs
3	Jobs/roles requiring fewer skills and less experience	NVQs*, Learning Accounts, appraisal, PDP**
4	Skilled roles	NVQs or equivalent
5	Qualified professional roles	Appraisal and PDP to support career progression
6	More advanced skills and roles	As above, role development encouraged in line with service priorities/personal career choices
7	‘Consultant’ roles	Flexible ‘portfolio careers’ informed by robust appraisal, career and PDP

\*NVQ: National Vocational Qualification; \*\*PDP: Personal Development Plan

Adapted from Department of Health (2001: 18). McBride and Mustchin (2007)

Case studies conducted by Munro et al (1997) and Rainbird et al (2002) evaluate the NHS/union partnership prior to and following the introduction of the escalator. Munro et al (1997) describe the development of the Return to Learn initiative set up in 1989

by the National Union of Public Employees in collaboration with the Workers Educational Association (WEA). Return to Learn was delivered by WEA tutors and offered educational opportunities to union members who had previously been disadvantaged in the educational system, thus reflecting the widening participation objective. Munro et al (ibid) report that by 1996, 3000 students had completed the programme. Following this, Return to Learn became known as UNISON's Open College flagship programme. The Munro et al (ibid) study focuses on two health care organisations, one university and one county court in which Return to Learn was adopted. In a very positive report they summarise the benefits to students, management and UNISON uncovered through the case studies.

Students experienced:

- a growth in confidence
- a sense of the value of their opinions
- the ability to critically assess others' views
- evidence of continued education following participation in Return to Learn
- some progressed to new jobs or careers
- a sense of achievement.

Management was reported to:

- be enabled to provide personal development and share the costs of learning
- benefit from the WEA's input into the delivery and development of learning.

There was also mutual benefit to both management and UNISON in that they were able to build and consolidate good working relationships, facilitating mutual respect and trust. Communication between different groups of employees at different levels is also reported to have been opened up. These findings are considered later in the thesis and compared to the LPR case study evidence.

Rainbird et al (2002) conducted a more recent evaluation of the UNISON and health care employer partnership looking into the UNISON/employer partnership in the then Lambeth Community Healthcare Trust. This offered a Communications Skills course in 1996 to employees who were nervous about taking part in formal training programmes. Following this, a number of courses were delivered as a result of the initial partnership including Return to Learn and the OU's K100 (Understanding Health and Social Care). Rainbird et al (ibid) point to the continuing involvement of 'enthusiastic local actors'. This was also evident in the present case study from an interview with Participant M, the Assistant Director of Learning and Development at a Health Care Trust:

[I] had an excellent relationship with UNISON going back to 1995, when I was looking around for a particular programme that would support me in delivering an individual approach or strategy that would engage with that part of the workforce, that had traditionally been neglected. One suggestion was to work with UNISON on their Return to Learn programme... that was the beginning of the relationship, working with UNISON around Return to Learn and basic communication skills. The communication skills and also Return to Learn was a specific piece of work that had been tried and tested for the workplace, perhaps not so much within the NHS context itself, so it was an exciting development. (Participant M)

This extract from the interview transcript outlines the motivations of this ‘enthusiastic local actor’ with a widening participation agenda to work with UNISON and bring *Return to Learn* to the NHS.

McBride et al (2006) report on their research into the development of skills in the NHS, which looked specifically at the implementation of the skills escalator. Through telephone interviews with management and a number of case studies of NHS Trusts, they conclude that there were multiple understandings of the skills escalator concept and that the escalator had been utilised by the NHS in three ways: to target specific groups of staff for learning opportunities in order to improve retention and recruitment in these areas; as a tool in the redesigning of roles; and, less commonly, by trusts it had been utilised across the whole organisation. McBride et al (ibid) report that the most common understanding of the skills escalator concept was found to be that it facilitated career development for existing and entry-level staff. A small number of interviewees understood the skills escalator to be for widening participation in learning and employment; and some saw it as a tool for the holistic development of the workforce. McBride et al (ibid, p75) conclude:

There is an assumption from the ‘subject matter experts’ that the Skills Escalator concept is widely understood in the NHS, and that the constituent parts of this holistic model will be widely adopted. However... it can be seen that interpretations do vary, and so does practice. Furthermore, the assumption that the Skills Escalator is a well known and established concept is in part contradicted by the high proportion of interviewees at Trust level that did not seem to know or clearly understand the concept put forward.

Conflicting interpretations of concepts such as the skills escalator are reflected in the case study reported in this thesis. An assessment of the LPR actors' understanding of the concept of the learning organisation is detailed in Chapter 5 through an application of LNT. This leads to the question of what could be achieved if concepts in organisational learning development were fully understood by all individuals trying to implement them within their organisations, and how this could be achieved.

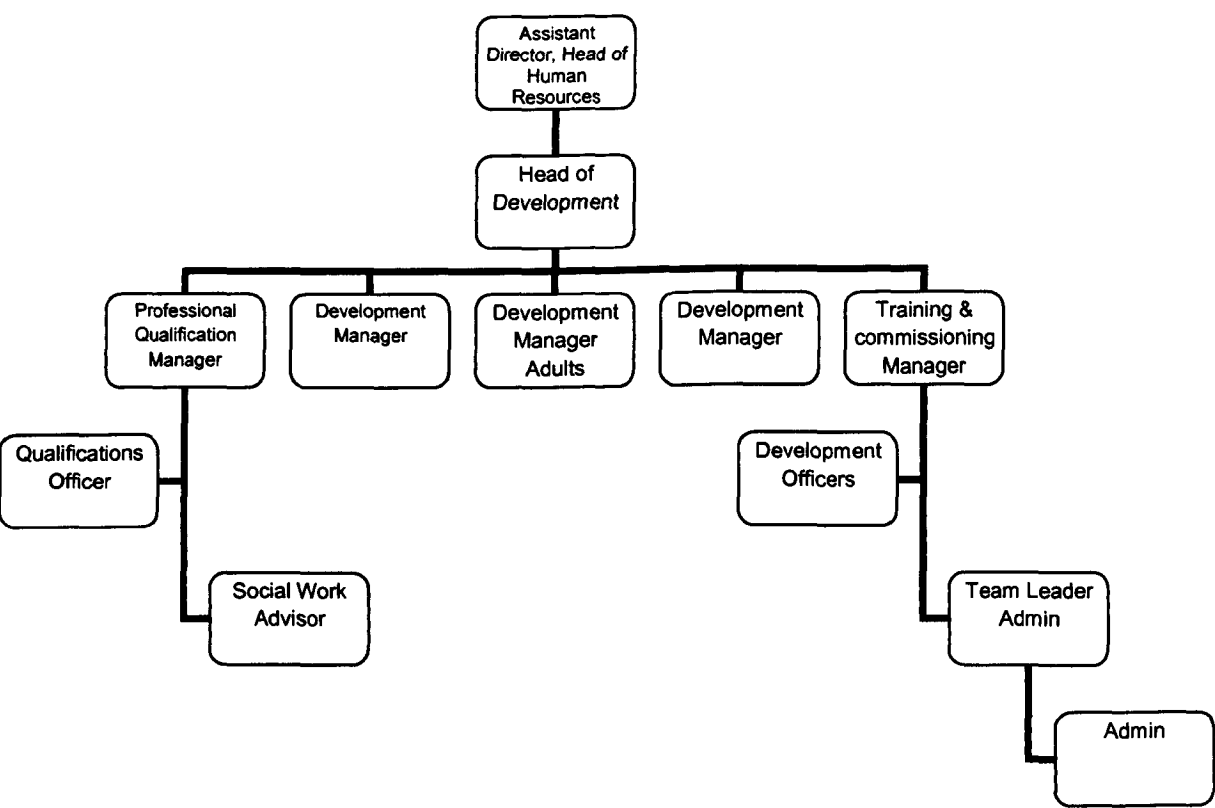
This section has described the development of learning opportunities in health and social care, UNISON-employer partnerships and UNISON's involvement in the development and implementation of the skills escalator in the NHS. It has included an analysis of UNISON's strategy towards union and workplace learning; why it has negotiated partnerships with employers; and how opening up routes to professional qualifications, which the LPR exemplifies, builds on UNISON's wider strategy for workplace learning. The role of UNISON in the development of the LPR is outlined later in this chapter.

### **SCIE and the Social Care Organisation Context**

This section details specificities of the social care sector and explores why there is an agency disseminating the learning organisation resource best practice model. It also provides information about the case study employer's approach to training and development, the impact of the wider regulatory framework on the organisation, and the extent to which SCIE criteria were being met by the case study social care organisation.

Information about the case study social care organisation was obtained from interviews and documentary evidence. The services of the organisation are provided within an English county council. The figure below presents the structure of its workforce development team, which had recently undergone restructuring at the time of the data collection in spring 2009.

Figure 4.1: Case Study Social Care Organisation Workforce Development Team



Participant P, the Job Development Manager at the case study social care organisation, referred to a number of Department of Health initiatives in social care in progress at the time of interview, namely the holistic approach of ‘personalisation’ set out in the ministerial concordat ‘Putting people first: A shared vision and commitment to the transformation of adult social care’ (DoH 2007). Participant P also talked about

the role of SCIE at a conference s/he had attended, ‘coming to talk about their new booklet on personalisation’.

SCIE sets out its mission and role in social care as follows:

[Our mission] is to identify and spread knowledge about good practice to the large and diverse social care workforce and support the delivery of transformed, personalised social care services. We aim to reach and influence practitioners, managers and the sector leadership who have responsibility for service delivery in adults’ and children’s services. (SCIE 2011)

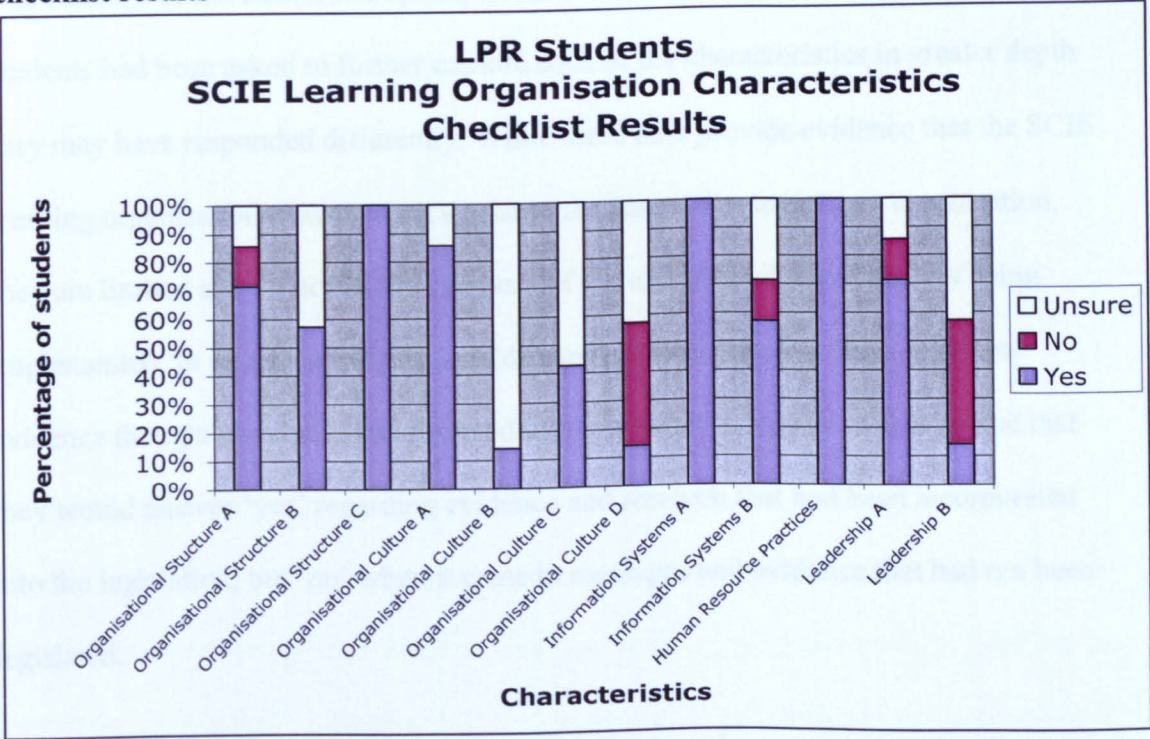
Its role as an independent charity funded by the Department of Health is also to identify and disseminate ‘the knowledge base for good practice in all aspects of social care throughout the United Kingdom. Only by understanding what works in practice – and what does not – can services be improved, and the status of the workforce be raised’ (ibid). The extent to which SCIE is achieving its mission and role can be investigated using case study evidence about learning in the social care organisation to uncover knowledge about the SCIE Learning Organisation resource and the extent to which the characteristics are present in the organisation. An analysis of data gathered from the LPR students’ questionnaire (described below) and the in-depth qualitative interviews with the case study social care employees who had been involved in the LPR provides some evidence of this success. The limitations of this analysis should be recognised, however, as the data cannot provide a full picture of learning in the social care organisation, being restricted to that gathered from those already involved in learning in the organisation.



Findings from the LPR Student Questionnaire

In addition to the telephone interviews with students, data were also collected from LPRSW students working in the case study social care organisation during a bridging workshop that they attended as a part of the degree programme. All seven of these students (a 100% response) completed a questionnaire that asked them a number of questions based on the SCIE learning characteristics. It also asked them for other examples of learning in their organisation, their future learning plans and their satisfaction with the LPRSW degree. The results of the questionnaire are detailed in the chart below.

Figure 4.2: LPRSW students’ SCIE learning organisation characteristics checklist results



More than half of the students found eight of the twelve SCIE learning organisation characteristics (for a full list see Appendix H) present in the organisation. This was a

positive response indicating that the SCIE criteria were being met by the social care organisation, thus meeting the requirements outlined for a learning organisation. All seven students indicated that there was cross-organisational and collaborative working, continuous development for all staff including a clear supervision and appraisal policy, and effective information systems for internal and external communications. However, the response they gave to the open question 8b about the weaknesses of the degree program contrasted with this finding. Six of the seven students highlighted communication with their local authority as a weakness of the degree programme.

The findings of the closed and open questions conflicted, suggesting that if the students had been asked to further explore each of the characteristics in greater depth they may have responded differently. While these data provide evidence that the SCIE learning organisation characteristics exist in the case study social care organisation, they are limited and do not enable analysis of the extent to which of them is being implemented. In response to Question 2d, 'Are messages from research and new evidence thought about and incorporated into practice?' the students highlighted that they would answer 'yes' regarding evidence and research that had been incorporated into the legislation, but 'no' when it came to messages and evidence that had not been legislated.

The students listed the following other examples of learning in their organisation:

- the Learning and Development Centre
- internal staff training

- opportunities for external training
- sponsorship for higher education
- recognition of learning via non academic routes.

All seven students listed their intention to go on to study for post qualifying awards.

One student indicated a desire to complete further OU courses which s/he had been unable to complete as a part of the degree; another indicated s/he did not plan to continue with any more formal learning unless s/he had to.

All seven students listed the group study as a benefit of the partnership route, particularly in terms of support and experience. Three students listed the bridging workshops as a strength of the degree programme. Other strengths listed included the study leave made available by the employer and the opportunity to complete the degree as a work-based programme.

### **Findings from the Social Care Organisation Interviews**

The questions to the LPR actors in the social care organisation (reported in Appendix C) directly addressed organisational structure and culture, information systems, HR practices and leadership. Their responses to these questions elicited information on whether this model was being implemented in practice in the employer organisation. As previously outlined in Chapter 3, the objective of the research was not to complete an in-depth analysis of the SCIE's learning organisation characteristics in the case study organisation but rather to explore formal and informal learning in the organisation by investigating the degree of implementation of the SCIE characteristics

and various aspects of the LPRSW. The qualitative in-depth interviews with the research participants revealed some evidence pertaining to this. While little evidence was found that interviewees from the social care organisation had used the SCIE Learning Organisation resource, they referred to SCIE resources: 'I think people probably do use them, and certainly in workforce development when people are training...I may well signpost people to them or find them really useful to keep myself up to date' (Participant P); and Participant O, Social Work Development Officer in the social care organisation, stated that s/he also referred to the SCIE resources as a source of information: 'I have been on their website, for example, and would...get information'.

### **The development of the LPRSW degree**

This section uses the case study interviews and documents to detail the context of the LPRSW degree and its development, including when the partnership was first set up and how the initiative was then built on the trust established through earlier programmes delivered through the partnership.

Details of the creation of UNISON were outlined during the interviews with representatives from all three organisations. UNISON was created in 1993, following a merger between the National and Local Government Officers' Association (NALGO), the Confederation of Health Service Employees (COHSE) and the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE). The merger was the result of a response to the political climate at the end of the 1980s (Terry 2000). With the re-election of the Conservative government under Thatcher in 1987, trade unions, whose membership was in decline, were feeling the threat of eradication (ibid). The key challenges to these unions at the time were the Conservative government's rejection of the post-war welfare state and the unions' reduced influence on policy regarding service provision (ibid). The response of newly-formed UNISON to these challenges reflected the different political traditions and affiliations of its three components. While NUPE and COHSE had been affiliated to the Labour party, NALGO was not (ibid). Rodney Bickerstaffe (2000), General Secretary of UNISON until 2001, described UNISON's determination not to simply focus on recruiting more members but to build on campaigning skills developed prior to the merger. Bickerstaffe writes of his intention that 'in the future, no academic, no person from the media, no politician would think of commenting on any of the key social policy areas without

asking the view of UNISON and its members' (ibid: p18). He aimed by 2010 to 'develop an attractive union that will provide members with what they want and help us to go out and recruit and organise those hundreds of thousands of public sector workers who are in no union at all' (p21). These aims are reiterated by Carpenter (2000), reviewing the effects of UNISON's efforts regarding social policy and particularly how UNISON dealt with New Labour.

Sutherland (2000) explores the philosophy, benefits and challenges in the development of UNISON's approach to lifelong learning work, and identifies at one end of the membership spectrum a cross-section of the population, namely women, who had suffered the greatest disadvantage from inadequacies in the contemporary education system. He outlines benefits including the 2000 members, 80% of whom were women, who participated in the Return to Learn programme.

As McBride (2000) details UNISON's position regarding the fair representation of its female members: 'During the creation of UNISON [it was agreed that] the promotion of equal opportunities and fair representation should be central to the union's organisation and structure at all levels' (p100), and how the representation of women was amongst the organisation's founding principles. McBride (2001) argues that UNISON indicated its intent to pursue gender democracy but did not place oppressed groups such as women at the heart of its constitution. McBride acknowledges the new sources of power that were generated for women through the implementation of proportionality in the female-dominated union, but criticises the continuing traditional power structures in the union.

The rest of this chapter focuses on interview and documentary evidence provided by the LPR actors on the development of the LPR. While neither the documentary evidence detailing UNISON's learning agenda and strategy nor the key aims listed in the LPR guide specifically mention women, the interview transcripts presented on the following pages do detail UNISON's role in the provision of courses aimed specifically at them.

The Return to Learn programme discussed earlier in this chapter predated the LPRSW degree. Participant A, Head of the UNISON Open College, described the development of the Return to Learn programme, which began in 1988. The following outlines his/her own involvement in this process, which, s/he felt, was unsystematic:

Return to Learn was established in about 1988 and grew quite slowly but significantly from 1988 through to 1993, when we got UNISON going...I became responsible for the whole thing...so by 1993 we had Return to Learn up and running in about four of the UNISON regions; London, the South East, West Midlands, a Northern Region and possibly the East Midlands...but it wasn't systematic.

Participant A also detailed the new structure of UNISON and its impact on the Return to Learn programme. The fast growth and success of Return to Learn is shown in the quote below.

Within the new structure of UNISON in '93 there was a new education and training department established. [It] had three strands to it. There was a trade union activist strand...being the strong one that has always been present in trade unions, and there was another one for staff training, and there was a third one which I was in charge of,

which became known as the UNISON Open College, and that was about that kind of work that we have mentioned.

Participant A spoke about how s/he was given the responsibility to develop the Return to Learn programme across the whole of UNISON, and reflected that by about 1994 UNISON was running it in every region so that its members could take up the opportunity in their own time at no cost to themselves. After developing Return to Learn, UNISON brought out a set of courses for women called Women, Work and Society, which ran in about four regions at this time.

Further progress with these workplace learning initiatives was not achieved without difficulties. At this time UNISON was providing funding for the costs of the Return to Learn programme. This was noted as a problem by Participant A:

Why don't we start talking to some employers about it, because we know we've have got a good programme here...we knew that employers were beginning to think at that time about widening their training and development to all staff...lots and lots of good managers within the Health Service and local government were aware and wanted to do something about it...we could say to those employers – look we've got a tried and trusted programme of learning here that is nationally accredited through the open college network with credits at levels 1, 2 and 3. And why don't we just start to talk to some employers to see if they are interested? So that's what I did, on spec, to some employers around the country where I knew that they were interested in working with UNISON. I didn't go to employers where I knew that we would get a bad response. I went to employers who I thought ... would be interested in this. I knew that the union locally was interested. So we started off with the very first Return to Learn agreements were in the Bury St Edmunds area: we had an



NHS trust. We had Staffordshire County Council school meals workers and another one in a health service in South London and there were a number of others in the first six months. When we went along we very much presented to them the idea that here is something that you can't do – we can do this – we can show you how to do it, with no strings attached.

Participant A also talked about how UNISON helped to initiate the development of workplace learning partnerships with employers, leading to the LPR:

It wasn't just about the union acting as an enabler: it was the union using its trade union organisation and trade union background and experience to bargain with the employer on a wider range of issues than what it traditionally had bargained on. The unions are obviously about pay and conditions, that's what we do, most of our work. But what we say is that we can bargain on a wider landscape, and learning is one of those landscapes. But we were coming not with a series of demands to the employer – we were coming with answers.

The first consultative paper... was called Modernising the Social Care Workforce and I think it was at the stage they published their paper, and it raised issues about registration of all staff and started to move in the direction of qualifications for all staff at that time. Staff weren't seen to be given training opportunities, it was all in the press, you know, the sort of problems that there were. It was known that the social care workforce, a large part of it, about 80%, had no qualifications. So the message that we were giving to the employers about we can show you how to do this, was coming at the right time and coincided with their need and awareness about the need to do something with these groups of staff.

Documentary evidence from Participant A provided further information on UNISON and learning. Eight key points in UNISON's learning agenda and strategy were listed (see below). These eight points focused on the benefits to employees and UNISON

itself of UNISON's involvement in training and education. No reference is made to an agenda or strategy for UNISON's relationship with employers other than that it positioned itself in relation to employer workforce development strategies (point 8). In this way the documentary evidence focuses primarily on the benefits to employees – learning opportunities; providing skills for life and personal growth; empowering employees in the workplace – and benefits to UNISON, namely building its capacity, increasing its rights in the workplace and aligning it with both employers and government in terms of workplace strategies.

1. UNISON organises around learning to help provide opportunities for union members (and potential members) and to build union capacity.
2. Asserting UNISON's right to represent member interests on training, development and learning at work.
3. Challenging inequality.
4. A definition of learning that goes beyond economic utilitarianism.
5. Valuing skills for life and personal growth.
6. Empowering members at work, in their homes and in their communities.
7. Necessity for engaging and helping to transform vocational qualifications.
8. Positioning UNISON in relation to employer and government workforce development strategies.

Further documentary evidence provided by Participant A details the range of learning opportunities offered by UNISON from entry level to Level 4 degree qualifications such as the Social Work degree programme (see Table 4.2 ).

Table 4.2: Summary of social care learning opportunities offered by UNISON in 2008

Entry 3 to Level 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Skills for Life – initial assessment and programmes</li> <li>• ESOL programmes</li> <li>• Careconnect Learning IT programmes</li> </ul>
Levels 1-3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Induction in Care</li> <li>• Learning for you</li> <li>• Improve Your Study Skills</li> <li>• Return to Learn</li> <li>• Working in Care</li> </ul>
Level 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding Health and Social Care</li> <li>• Registered Manager's Award</li> <li>• Work-based Degree in Social Work</li> <li>• Work-based Diploma in Nursing</li> </ul>

Corresponding to these developments in UNISON there were changes occurring within the case study social care organisation. In 1995 a workplace learning agreement was established as a result of the modernisation of its home-care services, which required a whole new range of skills in home carers. Management at the organisation recognised the training needs:

In about '95...managers were saying to us 'As a training function my team of home help are very enthusiastic...but we feel there is a skill deficit in terms of their ability to communicate effectively'...because of a learning need UNISON locally said, 'We think this is a wider problem and it coincides with our representation about your reform of the home care service. We think we can help you, because we have training and development team resources'....We introduced the UNISON written communication skills course and that was the start of it. (Participant L: Training and Development Officer, Social Care Organisation /UNISON Consultant)

Participant L went on to describe the move from a partnership for this communication skills course to a learning partnership for numeracy and Access courses through to the introduction of the OU K100 course, the Diploma in Social Work and then the

LPRSW degree. The change of government to New Labour at this time was seen as a political driver. Participant L cited a focus on widening participation as a crucial factor in the development of the LPR: 'There was a political drive around widening participation and the council employing local people...giving them the opportunity to develop through work-based learning'.

Participant A referred to the new Labour government as a driving force for UNISON's advancing its workplace learning partnerships in the area of social care to provide a new route into social work. Following the change of government and the establishment of the UNISON Learning Fund, UNISON put in a bid to develop access to a new route to social work training in partnership with a social care employer and Ruskin College in Oxford. This partnership opened up social work training in a number of councils until it became obvious that the 'scale of the operation we were trying to operate would be too big for them: [Ruskin] couldn't do it' (Participant A). At this time UNISON had already established a partnership with the OU on K100 (Understanding Health and Social Care) and was talking at length with the university about broadening the availability of its programmes with employers. Working with the OU's Sub Dean for External Relations, Assistant Director of Social Work and a lecturer in social work, UNISON adapted the existing work-based programme so that it was able to offer the Diploma in Social Work. Working with the OU, UNISON saw the advantage of [not only providing] a progression route for staff right through to a professional qualification but...on a national basis...with a national provider of the quality of the OU' (Participant A). This beneficial partnership was also highlighted by

Participant L, who pointed to the OU's ethos 'of being a very supportive learning environment'.

The interview reveals that Participants L and A, amongst others, acted as key participants in the development of the LPR. This was acknowledged in the interviews.

I do think people are quite significant in these sorts of projects...it helped because I was part of that network and a number of the managers at the social care organisation would have known me...I think I was seen as a trusted broker for UNISON because we were seen as one of the management good guys... You know we didn't always see eye to eye with UNISON but we had a strong and healthy relationship. UNISON trusted me and the social care organisation; I had a reputation with them which I think helped. It helped to oil the wheels.' (Participant L)

In addition to identifying 'enthusiastic local actors' (as also mentioned by Rainbird et al (2002) in their evaluation of UNISON and health care employer partnership discussed earlier in this chapter), the importance of a trusting relationship in partnership work was highlighted. As Participant L outlined, s/he was a key actor in the partnership, trusted by both UNISON and managers at the social care organisation. This trust was crucial to the development of the workplace learning partnership.

The need for a trusting relationship in the development of partnerships is also highlighted in Rainbird et al's (2003) exploration of employee voice and training at work through NHS and other case studies looking at learning partnerships between managers and union representatives, which found that 'it is clear that joint work on

training and development can contribute to improved communications between managers and union representatives, which can form the basis of trust' (ibid: p74). In addition to the recognised benefits of joint working, Rainbird et al argue that any further benefits of the relationship may not necessarily lead to a trusting relationship between the unions and managers. The development of the partnerships for training were possible as a result of their being seen as separate from the industrial relation structures. The importance of trust for the development of the LPR is explored in more detail later in this thesis.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter has outlined the context surrounding the LPR initiative. The first part of the chapter explored the development of trade union involvement in workplace learning through an analysis of the educational and political context, leading to the introduction of the LPR. The case study social care context was then looked at in greater detail to support an understanding of the implementation of LPR and further understanding of why the initiative was taken forward. This was achieved through insight into the employer's approach to training and development and the impact of the wider regulatory framework on the organisation. Lastly, drawing on evidence from the case study research, details were provided about when the partnership with the employer was first set up and how the initiative built on the trust established through earlier programmes delivered through the partnership.

In the next chapter, LNT is explored in detail to support understanding of the theory as it is applied in the data analysis/discussion chapters. In the second part of the chapter the theory is applied to the LPR to describe the actors, processes and structure of this learning partnership. Evidence is incorporated from both the interview data and the documentary evidence gathered during the case study research.

## 5. The Interpretative Framework

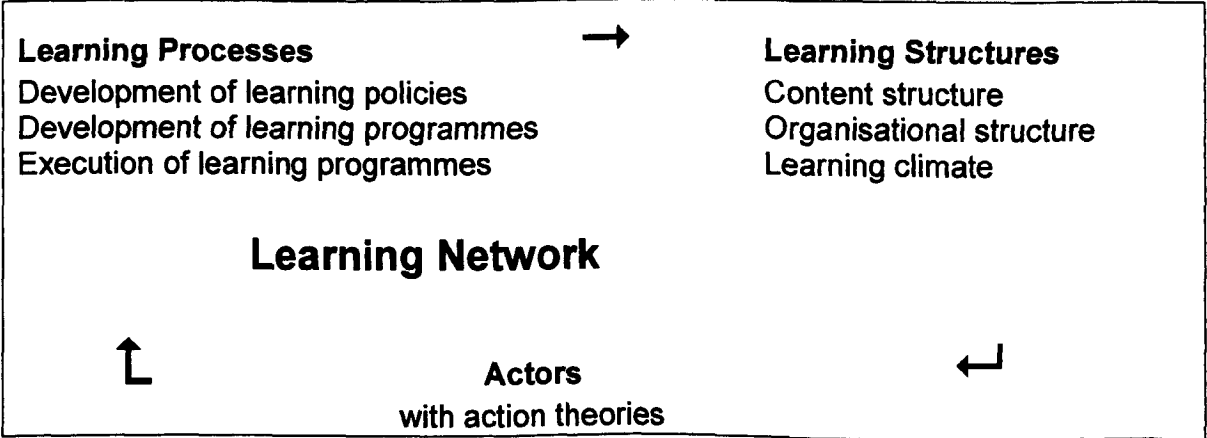
### Introduction

A number of approaches and theories pertaining to learning in organisations were identified in the literature review. Learning Network Theory (LNT) integrates a number of these theories. LNT was employed in the current research to interpret the case study data. The key principles of LNT have already been outlined in the literature review. The first part of this chapter explores it in greater detail to understanding of the theory in the data analysis and discussion chapters. In the second part of the chapter the theory is applied to the Learning Partnership Route (LPR) to describe the actors, processes and structure of this learning partnership. Evidence is incorporated from both the interview data and the documentary evidence gathered during the case study research.

### The Learning Network

The main components of a learning network, as described by Poell et al (2000), are learning structures, learning processes and actors. These are illustrated in Figure 5.1 and described below.

**Figure 5.1: The learning network of an organisation**





In Figure 5.1 it is not clear if any of the components of LNT are more central to the network than any other, so it is left to the reader or interpreter to decide which component they should start with in an exploration of the theory. A clue provided by Poell et al (ibid), but not evident in Figure 5.3, is found in their more detailed description of the component. The quote below reveals that the learning actors have the most prominent position ‘at the heart’, and for this reason I start with the actors in my description of the LNT.

Poell et al (ibid) state that

At the heart of each learning network are the learning actors, that is, those engaged in organizing learning...They are referred to as learning actors, because they are regarded as stakeholders who act deliberately on the basis of their own theories and interests with respect to work-related learning. (p33)

In contrast to social network theory (White et al 1976), it is not the different types and numbers of actors in the learning network that are of importance in LNT: in the learning network, learning is thought to take place when actors acquire and develop *action theories*. Poell et al (ibid) utilize the notion of action theories based on the work of Argyris and Schon (1978), arguing:

Action theories encompass the norms, ideas and rules that more or less explicitly guide and legitimise people’s actions. (p33)

Poell and Krogt (2006) define learning action theories as (a) learners’ views on learning activities and (b) an actor’s views on the organisation of learning programs.

The learning network theorists are not referring to mental operations when referring to concepts such as the learning processes and strategies. They see these as socio-organisational.

Poell et al (2000) state:

The learning network theory...focuses on what happens between people as they interact socially, rather than on what takes place within a person's mind. (p34)

For Poell et al (ibid), LNT centres on behaviour rather than cognition. One distinct problem uncovered through the use of LNT in the present study is that there appears to be a conceptual shift between the three elements of the interpretative frame and identifying theoretical types of learning network. Following a description and outline of some of the structures, action theories and processes from the case study data, it would be expected that uncovering the underlying theoretical type of learning network would be straightforward. However, as shown later in this chapter and in chapters 6 to 9, interpreting the type of learning network from the case study data relied more heavily on the analysis of the very mental operations that the learning network theorists argue are unnecessary.

The purpose of conducting an interview was considered in depth in the methodology chapter. Patton (1990) defines it as '[finding] out what is on someone's mind... We interview people to find out from them those things which we cannot directly observe'. This is a good explanation of one of the key reasons interviews were employed as the main research method here, yet there is a tension with the position of Poell et al (ibid) outlined above. While the research questions could have been addressed through observations of the learning processes in the organisation, this would have only have led to the current informal and formal learning in the organisation being explored and evidenced. It would not have been possible to identify the role of UNISON in planning, implementing and evaluating the social work programmes.

The action theories of actors in the learning network are thought to impact on the learning processes. The process component of the learning network comprises three key processes: (a) the development of learning policies; (b) the development of learning programmes; and (c) the execution of these learning programmes (ibid). While Poell et al (ibid) recommended that the process occurs in this order, they acknowledge that there is no fixed time order. In the development of learning policies, Poell et al refer to the general direction that the learning network will take: for example what people will learn and how this will be achieved. They list activities such as reflecting on learning needs and listing *desired competencies* as part of this process. At the next process stage, the development of learning programmes and the learning activities deemed necessary for the organisation are put together. For example, the current training market is scanned for the most appropriate way to meet the learning needs. During the final process stage of the learning network and the execution of learning programmes, people are actively learning. Examples of activities listed include solving problems at work or taking online courses.

Poell et al (ibid) describe learning structures as the stable patterns that develop over time as a result of people interacting to organise learning activities. They argue that learning structures can be observed in certain content and organisational structure and also in the learning climate. They outline three key structures: first, the content structure, which is the profile of the learning programmes carried out; second, the organisational structure, which details the division of the actors' tasks and responsibilities to organise the learning programmes and the role of each actor in each of the three learning processes; and third, the learning climate. In contrast to other approaches to the learning climate, such as the structural and cultural approaches, the learning network theorists clearly define their approach to the learning climate

(Poell and Moorsel 1996). A learning climate in the learning network is defined as the norms and values regarding learning that are enclosed within the structure of a learning network, thus making a distinct link to learning and structure.

Poell et al (2000) describe four types of learning network. These are outlined in Table 5.1, below. In the *liberal learning network*, individual employees are empowered and the learning policies and networks are individually orientated. The *vertical learning network* involves the linear planning of learning activities and the organisational structure is centralised and dominated by management. The *horizontal learning network* is characterised by egalitarian relationships and there are no pre-designed learning policies, as these develop through learning from current programmes and activity. As the name suggests, the *external learning network* is co-ordinated from outside the organisation and the learning programmes adopted result from innovations emerging from the professional field. Poell et al (ibid) go on to outline that LNT does not rest on the assumption that an organisation’s learning network will fit neatly into one of the four types, but expects it to display characteristics from several.

Table 5.1: Four theoretical types of learning networks

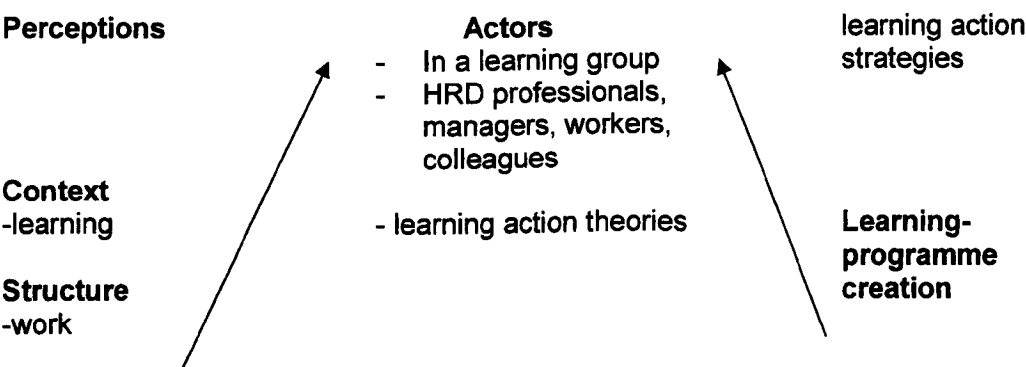
	Learning Networks			
	Liberal	Vertical	Horizontal	External
Learning Processes	Single Activities	Linerarly Planned	Organically Integrated	Externally Co-ordinated
Development of Learning Policies	Implicit	Planning	Learning	Inspiring
Development of Learning Programmes	Collecting	Designing	Developing	Innovative
Execution of Learning Programmes	Self directing	Guiding	Counselling	Advisory
Learning Structures				
Content Structure	Unstructured	Structured	Open or thematic	Methodical
(profile)	(individually orientated)	(task or function orientated)	(organization or problem orientated)	(profession orientated)
Organizational structure	Loosely coupled	Centralized	Horizontal	Externally directed
(relations)	(contractual)	(formalized)	(egalitarian)	(professional)
Learning Climate	Liberal	Regulative	Intergrative	Inspiring

Source: Poell et al 2000: p35

**Learning Projects**

Following his work with Moorsel (1996), Poell (2006) further developed LNT to explore workplace learning and, more specifically, ‘learning projects’. These provide a modified picture of how learning networks function. Figure 5.2, below, demonstrates this modification: there is no longer a one-directional flow between components, and the actors are placed at the heart of the figure.

**Figure 5.2: Learning programme creation by a learning group of actors in a context**



Source: Poell 2006: p154

Learning projects are defined succinctly by Poell (2006) as:

A small temporary learning network of employees within an organisation, a group of people who organise learning activities together. [A learning program is] focused on one central theme or problem that has relevance for work and for those who organise it...they can take place in a formalised training setting organised by HRD professionals, but learning is also brought about informally by the employees themselves in their everyday work situation. (p153)

The inclusion of both formal and informal learning in this definition is critical and very relevant to later chapters of this thesis. This suggests that the authors subscribe to the existence of both formal and informal learning, and LNT is applicable to both. Strangely, though, the learning network theorists make no attempts to incorporate the two types of learning more specifically in their theory of workplace learning. The exact nature of a learning project and what is incorporated in this definition is considered in depth in Chapter 9 of this thesis. In this chapter, however, and in the application of the theory to the LPR, LNT is applied as defined by Poell et al (2006) in order to consider the benefits and limitations of the theory.

Discussion in Poell (2006) centres on the existence and diversity of multiple learning programs in one organisation. This is touched upon later in this chapter when the action theories of the actors involved in the LPR are described and explored, but here I look at the diversity that exists in one learning project rather than the conflicts and consensus that can exist in different learning projects in one organisation.

### **Directions for further research**

Poell (2006) proposes that further research into multiple learning projects is needed, specifically when looking at the diverse learning action theories and learning action strategies that can exist between the various actors. This particular aspect of a learning network can be explored not only between learning projects but also within them. I attempt this in the second section of this chapter, as the diversity of the learning action theories and strategies of the LPR actors are uncovered in the case study data.

## **Applying the Interpretative Framework**

### **The Actors**

Prior to the identification of the LPR actors it is necessary to further understand what the learning network theorists mean by the term *actor*. Poell (2006) suggests (with reference to Figure 5.1 p117) that:

Relevant actors are workers, managers, HRD professionals, trade unions, workers' associations, external training providers, and so forth. (p79)

Here they identify not only individual people but also whole organisations as actors. Using this seemingly broad definition of actors has the potential to make any interpretation of the case study data difficult; thus I use a more concise definition of an actor here to aid my analysis of the case study data, by defining the individuals who have, or have had, a role in the LPR as 'learning actors'.

### **Learning Partnership Route Learning Actors**

At the most simple level of data analysis it is apparent that learning actors come from the three main partners, namely the case organisation, the OU and the trade union UNISON. However, the interview data provide a wider picture of central and peripheral actors in this learning network. Seventeen LPR learning actors were interviewed (see Appendix B). A further twenty learning actors were acknowledged by the interviewees as having some involvement in the LPR, meaning that in total thirty-seven LPR learning actors were identified. This included not only central actors from the case organisation, the OU and UNISON but also the students themselves. Students' involvement is evident from their inclusion at the planning and review stages and by their attendance at the stakeholder meetings. Other peripheral actors included

the other trade unions and their facilities, input from learning and development departments at other social care organisations. One key set of actors identified as absent from the stakeholder meetings was the service users,<sup>1</sup> although these were acknowledged to have been present at the potential students' application and interview stages.

I think there is one facet that we still need to learn about: that's service user involvement and how we include that if we are going to, how we include them in the selection process and how we engage further with service users. I think it's a piece of work that needs doing if we want to engage further... I know from the external on the degree there is service user involvement on the interview day, when applicants are invited up and it's a whole day session. There is service user input as they are part of an interviewing panel. I think it is something that is very important, and we have to get to grips with that I think a bit more if we are going to go down that route. (Participant O, Social Work Development Officer, social care organisation)

From the quote above by a participant from the social care organisation it is apparent that the interviewee believes that there are additional roles for service users in work-based learning that should be further explored.

This brief consideration of the actors central to the LPR has highlighted not only who the key actors are, but also those who are excluded but who the participants believe should be included more centrally. At this stage it would be appropriate to employ social network analysis to identify the frequency and strength of the links between the actors involved in the case study partnership. This will not be done, however. Poell et al (2000) clearly distinguish LNT from social network analysis, which is one of the most commonly-used ways of investigating

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<sup>1</sup> Definition of 'service users' (taken from a Department of Health literature review undertaken in preparation for the introduction of the social work degree): 'Those who are *eligible* to access social work services – but also...those who define themselves as potential users of social work services, either because they anticipate a future need, or because they choose not to use the services that are currently available to them' (Swift 2002).



learning networks in contemporary research. It relies on the actors involved to investigate research data; Poell et al (ibid), alternatively name three main components of a learning network in an organisation and also highlight its processes and structure. For this reason the interview data are not subjected to any further quantitative analysis in terms of the actors involved. Following the application of a social network analysis, Pahor et al (2008), argue that it provides support for the network perspective on organisational learning:

The results presented in this article stress the importance of key individuals in the network. However, it is not just the individuals that are important; it is also the context in which the learning network emerges that is of crucial importance. Companies that wish to promote organizational learning should nurture the different contexts in which the learning network emerges. (p193)

This limitation of the application of social network analysis to uncover a learning network is thus realised by Pahor et al (2008) themselves. They recognise that it is 'limited to identification of key individuals in the network' (p193) and that the use of this analysis cannot uncover the full context in which the learning network emerges. As a critical realist I use an alternative means of interpreting the case study data: the application of thematic analysis.

### **Action Theories**

It is not the different types and numbers of actor in the learning network that are important in LNT: in the learning network, learning is thought to take place when actors acquire and develop action theories. Poell et al (2000) utilize the notion of action theories based on the work of Argyris and Schon (1978), stating:

Action theories encompass the norms, ideas and rules that more or less explicitly guide and legitimise people's actions. (p33)

Earlier in this chapter I outlined the process components of LNT and pointed out that learning action theories are thought to impact on learning processes. This is an appropriate point in the case study data analysis to address research question 1 to identify and explore the concept of a learning organisation from the viewpoint of the actors involved in the LPR (using the SCIE learning organisation characteristic resource (2004)). I define these action theories as ‘learning action theories’, as they are the norms and values that individuals and organisations apply specifically to the concept of learning.

The first set of learning action theories explored during the interviews was the learning actors’ action theories with regard to the concept and reality of establishing a learning organisation, and what this concept meant for them in practice. Responses from the interview participants differed widely, revealing that the actors were constrained by the organisation in terms of what learning actions they were able to employ. Their action theories around the concept of a learning organisation and culture were fluid and not something for which they had a crystallised set of norms and ideas. The following excerpt from an interview with an interviewee from the social care organisation illustrates that s/he believes more can be done to achieve his/her own notion of a learning organisation. However, later in the interview this same participant indicated that s/he did not have a clear idea of what a learning organisation and culture are.

I mean, I have got things that I think that I would probably like to push forward in terms of in the field of practice learning, because I know there are opportunities to utilise some of the knowledge base and experience some of our staff and senior social workers and senior practitioners have. Not necessarily a career opportunity; but once you rule out management and people going into management there seems to be a bit of a gap of people who want to remain practice-based and have built up a wide experience

of knowledge, say in the area of working with children and families. There are practitioners who enjoy maybe taking students on placements, but it's the arguments about whether a team has got the capacity to do that, and whether they have got the individual capacity according to their commitments. I just think [we need] a little space where ... we could build up what used to be called pupil learning units a long time ago or student learning units. This is something which I think goes back to the '70s. I'm not quite sure but I think they were like little – almost like cocoons, where students went to professionals, probably senior practitioners who would maybe supervise maybe three, four, five students. They must have had their workload moderated or mediated. So what you have got is that they are still in practice, but they are still then offering their expertises. Not just one on one but in a much more structured way to be able to give and pass onto the next generation of social work students. So it begins to embed a sort of notion of what I see as a learning organisation that is using our learning. (Participant O, Social Work Development Officer, social care organisation)

I haven't really got an overview about what is seen as a learning culture and learning organisation. I have been through enough conferences now and heard enough definitions of it that I know nothing. It's in the individual perception. Sometimes it is just some jargon to work through. (Participant O)

While the interview participants from the social care organisation offered conflicting action theories in relation to the learning organisation, participants from UNISON provided clearer and more distinct action theories of learning in organisations. For example, the excerpt below indicates how a partnership actor from UNISON believed that the culture of learning in organisations requires more than just the employers input if it is to be achieved.

I think sometimes politicians understandably talk lively in a way about changing the culture of learning, but to really do it is a job that the key stakeholders have to be centrally involved in, and that involves the trade unions. It's not something that employers could do on their own, in my view, and the government needs to recognise

the role of trade unions in doing this much more than it does actually. (Participant E: UNISON National Learning and Workforce Officer)

The comments below indicate that one UNISON participant was very clear in his/her own mind about the concept of a learning organisation and the steps that social care organisations need to take to become a learning organisation.

As far as social services are concerned they're potentially a very good learning organisation, because they are required by government to get closely involved in all social work training. As you know, they provide all the placements and practice teachers and all that kind of stuff, which if you put that alongside a lot of industrial practice, certainly a few years ago that would have been exemplary. Now the employers are catching up like mad. But they weren't then, I don't think. So yeah, I'm not sure if that really answers your question. I'm probably rambling now, but the whole thing about the learning organisation: I tell you, there is one aspect about this that I think is very important: that is, the role of the first line manager is absolutely vital as a learning organisation-type person. They need to understand that their role is helping their staff to learn and develop from their practice, and giving them time to do it and helping them and becoming a tutor themselves. The first line manager needs to become a tutor or mentor if they can and not just a supervisor who's checking up that they're doing their paces right, and not just filling in forms and so on. (Participant F, Consultant, UNISON)

The evidence from the interview data about the action theories on the learning organisation indicate that partnership actors from the various organisations had not only contrasting views but also different levels of understanding of the concept of the learning organisation. The UNISON partnership actors gave different but clear action theories on the learning organisation. They were all consistent in appearing to have a clear and crystallised idea of what the concept of a learning organisation means. Most often this definition included the role of UNISON in achieving learning in a social care organisation, and the impact of the LPR

students on the process. The OU LPR learning actors portrayed clear notions of the learning organisation as a concept, and used it, as did the UNISON learning actors, in relation to the role that students can play in leading the social care organisation towards the goal of a learning organisation. The LPR learning actors from the social care organisation, however, appeared confused about what this concept represents.

One can conclude from this finding that both UNISON and the OU may be well placed to assist social care organisations in becoming a learning organisation or increasing organisational learning. One important theme that came through from the UNISON learning actors was the important potential role of key learning actors in matching the learning action theories of all actors so that they are striving towards the same goal.

Poell et al (2000) contend that norms and ideas can ‘explicitly guide and legitimise people’s actions’. If this is correct, it may explain why UNISON has been successful as a force in learning in social care organisations during the last twenty years. To achieve the goal of becoming a successful learning organisation, social care employees need to possess clarified and non-conflicting ideas about this learning organisation concept.

The next set of action theories explored in the data analysis using this interpretative framework is the actors’ norms, ideas and rules about SCIE and the SCIE learning organisation resource. The research method involved used the SCIE resource as a starting point from which to investigate the participants’ knowledge and understanding of learning in their organisation. All actors from the social care organisation and the OU were aware of the SCIE resources prior to the interview. Some UNISON actors, however, were not. The excerpts

below reveal the thoughts of two of the social care organisation actors who appeared quite knowledgeable about SCIEs work and resources.

**Researcher:** Have you seen the SCIE learning organisation resource at all?

**Participant P** (Job Development Manager, social care organisation): Yes...I was at a conference last week where they were coming to talk about their new booklet on personalisation, and I often go onto their website and try and keep up to date. Probably not as much as other people, but I am aware that they have got some stuff, and I think they are setting up some stuff around mental capacity act and web page resources.

**Researcher:** Have you seen the SCIE learning organisation characteristic resource? Is that something that your organisation would use?

**Participant P:** It is always difficult when you look at other resources, because sometimes local authorities want to have something that's theirs, branded. But I think people probably do use them, and certainly in workforce development when people are training, and I think some of my colleagues will definitely use them and I may well signpost people to them or find them really useful to keep myself up to date.

**Researcher:** Do you know if the SCIE resource has been used by your organisation?

**Participant O** (Social Work Development Officer, social care organisation): I don't know. I mean we are aware of SCIE and see SCIE and our learning development officers and managers work with them, in terms of knowing what they do, and yes, we are aware, and I have been into their website, for example, to try and get information. What's the other one that I use a lot? SWAP, that I think is the University of Southampton, isn't it? Moderated down there. I don't know so I've got stuff. Some of it is just research stuff and is very informative. I won't go on it continuously but if the need arises, so it's an 'as and when required'. And I know my manager ... used to attend meetings at SCIE ... They just go on and on, and there are all sorts of revamping and organisational and structural changes, and of who the governing bodies are responsible for every facet of care.

The actors from UNISON and the OU who were aware of the SCIE resource appeared to

apply the characteristics to their immediate situation and their role within the partnership in utilising the resource. For example, one OU actor commented:

Yes. I've seen some of this stuff [refers to key characteristics]. I suppose all I can do from my perspective is to encourage that when they are on the course, and I think that middle year when we went round and actually met with line managers and talked about it...it varied so much. Some managers were really open to the idea of encouraging learning, whereas some could hardly give us the time of day. It varied incredibly. I hope that we sowed a few seeds by having someone from the university going together to talk with the line manager, with the student present, about what the future learning needs were and about how these could be addressed in the workplace. I hope that that sort of filtered out and became not just for the student but really encouraged.

(Participant B: OU lecturer in Social Work)

This actor also offered his/her own action theory about the development of learning in the social care organisation and the role of managers in this process:

Some teams clearly have this interest in developing all the things SCIE has identified, whereas other teams are really much more interested in meeting targets etc, but not in the development of the individual. I think it does depend pretty much who is the manager of the team at the time, how the team behaves as to whether they develop either into a learning environment or not. (Participant B)

Applying the learning network interpretative framework to the case study interview data enabled investigation into the action theories held by the key actors on the concept and idea of a learning organisation. This revealed that the knowledge and theory differ not only between the organisations involved, but also between actors from the same organisation.

Despite efforts by SCIE to help social care employees understand what a learning organisation is, the data analysis revealed confusion amongst a number of the actors. UNISON actors,

however, were more confident talking about the concept as a vision, even when they could not precisely define the concept. In starting the fieldwork I decided not to ask the participants to define the concept of the learning organisation directly, as I did not expect that they would all be familiar with and use it. But as can be seen from the excerpts above, some of the actors in this learning network were familiar with the concept and had ideas, norms and rules about how it can work in practice.

### **The Processes**

The action theories of actors in the learning network are thought to impact on the learning processes. The process component of the learning network comprises three key processes (Poell et al 2000): (a) the development of learning policies; (b) the development of learning processes; and (c) the execution of these learning programmes. These three processes are described below.

### **Development of Learning Policies**

Here the theorists are referring to the general direction that the learning network will take, i.e. what people will learn and how this will be achieved. For example, in the LPR the general socio-organisational policy addressed the need to solve social worker recruitment and retention problems through the social care organisation's 'growing its own' social workers. In addition, the principle of widening participation, initiated and supported by UNISON, was applied in choosing employees who had not previously studied for a higher education qualification.

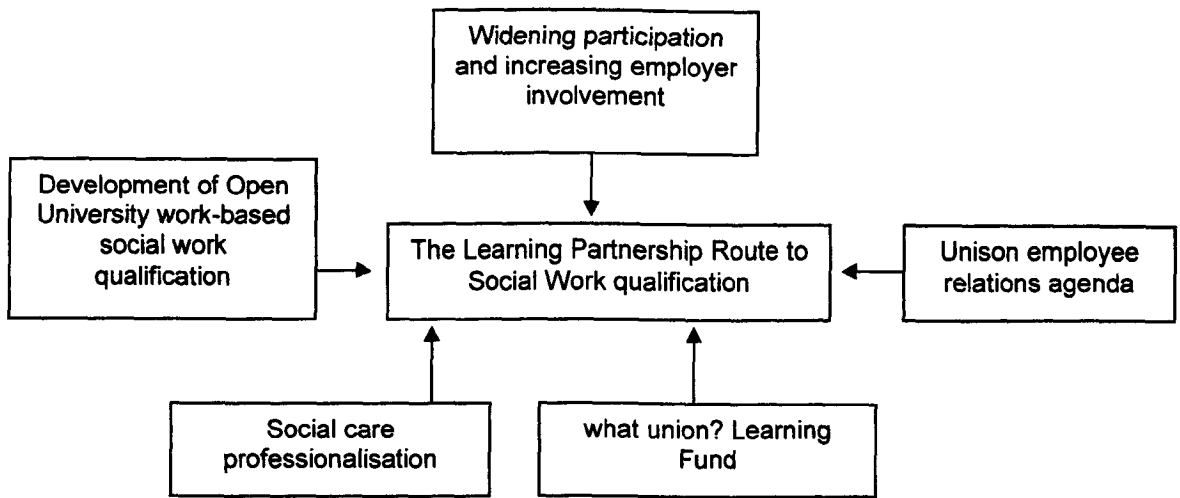


### **Development of Learning Programmes**

The development of learning programmes involves putting together the learning activities deemed necessary for the organisation. The current training market is scanned for the most appropriate way of meeting the learning needs. It was decided that the chosen employees should study for the LPRSW qualification via a distance learning, work-based course provided by the OU. This indicates that the organisation was reflecting on the needs of the workplace as well as on those of individual employees to produce a policy on this formal learning qualification.

### **Execution of Learning Programmes**

In the LPR learning network the case study organisation initially implemented the Diploma in Social Work, followed by the Social Work Degree programme for employees who met the widening participation agenda set out in this learning policy. The action theories of actors in the learning network are thought to impact on the learning processes, including the development of learning policies and programmes and their execution. While Poell et al (2000) recognise that it is commonly recommended that these processes occur in this order; they acknowledge that there is no fixed order. It is unclear from their description of LNT whether those applying the interpretative framework should outline and detail all these learning processes or whether the processes in this chapter could be interpreted by some other means. For the purpose of this case study, data analysis description is used as a starting point for the interpretation. Below, Figure 5.3 details the policies and programmes that led to the execution of the case study LPRSW qualification.

**Figure 5.3: Policies and programmes that led to the execution of the LPR**

How exactly do action theories impact on the learning processes? It is relevant here to consider the potential impact of the action theories on further learning network processes and changes that may be made to the policies and programmes run by the social care organisation as a result of learning that has taken place through the learning partnership. The excerpt below details the response of a UNISON actor who was asked about the future of the learning partnerships.

I'd like to think it does mean more staff our end and more at the Open University dedicated to making the partnership work a success. I'd like to think that those staff had a clear vision of where they're headed, and that UNISON had fallen in completely with the vision, as had the Open University. If we could see the best practice that we have begun to establish becoming typical of employers in the public sector so they're complementary to their straight training programme... So what I want is a structure at all levels which enables that to happen, that does mean that staffing at all levels, as I said earlier, is very important. Commitment is important at all levels, and having a learning offer which is not just suitable but is actually integrated with the working lives of the people it is offered to, so I would like to see tailor-made courses, for example in social care. In adult social care there should be an openings course and that should bring people onto the learning progression. Instead of them having to do an open, more

general Open University openings course, we should start developing tailor-made courses to fulfil the functions that we want them to. I'd hoped we would have moved beyond the point we are now, which is still experimental and pioneering, to being sustainable... If, when I leave, the UNISON/Open University partnership is considered to be completely sustainable for the future and valued by both organisations, then I reckon I'll have done my job. (Participant E, National Learning and Workforce Officer, UNISON)

This response from the UNISON National Learning and Workforce Officer indicates that s/he wants to further develop and sustain the development of the processes between UNISON, social care organisations and the OU. However, s/he also indicated that UNISON's policies were shifting towards other learning programmes:

We are putting all our resources now into the skills for life, K100 end of the spectrum. We have definitely pulled back from promoting the LPR as a priority. We're still supporting it, and if the time is right again for it to come out and be promoted wider then we will do that. (Participant E)

Feedback from one of the social care organisation actors, Participant O, a Social Work Development Officer, indicated that they may have stopped recruiting further cohorts to the LPRSW degree due to the length of the learning programme:

**Participant O** (Social Work Development Officer, social care organisation): ...quite simply, the MSc is two years, so this is just a quicker turn around with, I guess, a proven track record of somebody who's done a first degree. I get the impression there's an increased need in terms of professional standards,...the written reports and stuff like that, so I guess if you're a manager and you know somebody has completed a first degree they have obtained those necessary academic standards. I'm not saying that this is the right way, but just that that might be one way. ...I think the whole qualification support of staff at graduate level and postgraduate level PQ and NVQs – qualification

support and workforce priority – is all being reviewed by us, and there will be a piece of work undertaken by my new manager, and in turn her manager, where that's going to be looked at...with operational managers, and probably some more guidance [will be] given then

**Researcher:** Who would be deciding that? Would it be different for each department?

**Participant O:**

Well, it would be in consultation between the workforce development team and senior managers within CYPT and adult social care and health, and input they need from me on ... prior experiences of the grow your own schemes. Those workforce development priorities, they change over time, and I'm sure they're part of the mix. The changing nature of what the national agenda drivers for adult services are...the personalisation agenda, and maybe looking at how you reframe the workers that're going to be needed in teams, and what qualifications they're going to need. You've got the skills mixes in teams in terms of unqualified and qualified personnel. I'm sure they look at what qualifications and staff we support for each route within that mix, and what recruitment and retention levels are at any given time, along with opportunities for widening participation or the postgraduate route. I'm sure they're all in the mix as part of the discussions, so I don't think it has been stopped. It has always been held in review. We haven't seconded since 2006, but it's never been ruled out or ruled in: it's just a position that's being kept under review, and I think it is now coming to this review, if you see what I mean. So nothing has ever been excluded or included.

This social care organisation learning actor went on to describe the actors and the processes undertaken in planning and reviewing learning programmes, highlighting the role of workforce development, senior managers and policies such as the Department of Health's personalisation agenda. However, s/he made no reference to the other central learning actors of the LPRSW qualification, namely the OU and UNISON. This appears to indicate that for this actor, the internal actors with prescribed authority led to the learning processes in this social care organisation.

## **The Structures**

Poell et al (2000) describe learning structures as the stable patterns that develop over time as a result of people interacting to organise learning activities. They argue that their learning structures can be observed in certain content, organisational structures and the learning climate. They outline three key structures, described earlier, which I discuss below in relation to the LPR case study.

### **Content Structure**

The content structure, according to Poell et al (2000), is the profile of the learning programmes. The learning partnership between the social care organisation, UNISON and the OU began with the implementation of a work-based Diploma in Social Work programme. This was completed by two cohorts of students from the social care organisation. Following this, with the introduction of the degree in 2006, a further cohort of students embarked on to the BA degree in Social Work. The profile of each of these learning programmes is outlined in Table 5.2, below.

**Table 5.2: A comparison of learning activities undertaken in the Diploma in Social Work Programme and the Social Work Degree Programme**

<b>Learning Activities</b>	<b>Diploma in Social Work programme</b>	<b>Social Work Degree programme</b>
Practice learning courses	✓	✓
Non-practice learning courses	✓	✓
Bridging workshops		✓
Paid study leave	✓	✓
Workshops	✓	
Local Management Group	✓	
Stakeholder meeting	✓	✓
Workshops for line managers and practice assessors	✓	✓
Support group for students	✓	✓

### **The Organisational Structure**

This section details the actors’ division of tasks and responsibilities to organise the learning programmes and highlights how learning actors have played a role in each of the three learning processes. The evidence for the LPR learning network’s organisational structure is taken from the Social Work Degree Programme LPR Guide (The Open University 2006), which provides a general outline of the key participants and their roles.

### **Summary of Key Participants and Roles**

A nominated member of each sponsoring agency will act as agency coordinator (such as a member of the training or human resources section) and be responsible for identifying quality practice learning opportunities which meet the needs of each student. This person will be the contact point for the Open University staff to discuss individual students' learning needs. The agency coordinator will also be in a good position to help students set up informal support or study groups and organise representation on the Local Management Group or other forums for student representation.

Open University tutors and regional staff will work with practice assessors and agency coordinators to respond to individual students' learning and support needs.

Students' line managers and senior management require a high level of commitment and awareness of the LPR in the agency in order to meet students' learning and professional development needs. When a member of senior management attends or chairs the Local Management Group, it demonstrates real commitment to the endeavour and can generate cooperation from other senior managers.

Students' line managers', team members' and colleagues' awareness of learning needs (such as the student role) and receptivity to new ideas are important elements of a positive learning environment.

A member of the Open University regional staff will attend the Local Management Group and act as a communication point with the Faculty and individual tutors.

The Unison member of the Local Management group (whether or not a branch officer) is likely to be someone with field experience as a social care employee, and will report back regularly to the Unison branch. Unison has produced its own guide for branch officers involved in the Social Work Degree Programme (obtainable from the Open College).

Unison and Open University national LPR team members will be available for consultation and advice. The OU centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in Practice-Based Professional Learning will be involved in evaluating the development of the LPR.

Source: The Open University 2006

The key learning actors that can be identified from this Learning Partnership Communication are the agency coordinator, students, OU tutors, practice assessors, students' line managers,

senior management, team members, OU regional staff, UNISON branch members and LPR team members based at UNISON and the OU. The roles of the LPR learning actors in the partnership were also investigated in the case study interviews. The following table details a role analysis based on case study interview data.

**Table 5.3: Roles of the LPR learning actors**

Organisation	Job Title (role at time of involvement in LPR if left-otherwise current role)	Role in LPR
Open University	DipSW Programme & Course Tutor	Course tutor & LPR DipSW programme tutor visiting students on placement
Open University	Staff Tutor	Planning, implementation and continuing support throughout LPR
Open University	Programme Tutor	Course tutor & LPR Social Work Degree programme tutor. Runs Bridging Workshops
Open University	Sub Dean External Relations	Planning and implementation of the LPR
Open University	Lecturer in Social Work	Planning and implementation of the LPR
Open University	Assistant Director of Social Work (England)	Planning and implementation of the LPR
Other	Assistant Director of Learning & Development	External Advisor
Social Care Organisation	Training Manager	Management of LPR
Social Care Organisation	Training & Development Officer/ Consultant UNISON	Planning, implementation and management of LPR
Social Care Organisation	Social Work Development Officer	Supporting LPR students on placements and also the staff that took them on. Agency co coordinator role.
Social Care Organisation	Job Development Manager	LPR Actor colleague- no specific role
Social Care Organisation	Head of Learning & Development	Planning and implementation of the LPR
UNISON	Head of Open College	Planning and implementation of the LPR
UNISON	Membership Development Officer	Planning and implementation of the LPR
UNISON	National Learning & Workforce Officer	Management of LPR
UNISON	Consultant UNISON	External Evaluator (Participatory)
UNISON	Educational Convenor/ Single Status Officer	Planning, implementation and management of LPR. Also support for LPR students

The job titles and job roles above, taken from the documentary and interview evidence, can be combined to examine the learning actors' roles in the three learning processes, namely the



development of learning policies and of learning programmes and the execution of learning programmes. The results of this analysis are detailed in Table 5.4.

**Table 5.4: LPR Learning Actor Roles**

Key Learning Actors	Developing Learning Policies	Developing Learning Programmes	Executing Learning Programmes
Agency coordinator	✓	✓	✓
OU tutors	✓	✓	✓
Practice assessors			✓
Students' Line Managers			✓
Senior management	✓	✓	✓
Team members			✓
OU regional staff	✓	✓	✓
UNISON branch member	✓	✓	✓
Central UNISON LPR management	✓	✓	✓
Central OU LPR management	✓	✓	✓

Table 5.4 shows that all the key LPR learning actors had a role in the execution of this learning programme. Practice assessors, students' line managers and team members were not found to have had a named role in the development of the learning policy and this learning programme.

### **The Learning Climate**

The network theorists clearly define their approach as different from the structural and cultural approaches to the learning climate (Poell and Moorsel 1996). A learning climate in the learning network is defined as the norms and values regarding learning that are enclosed

within the structure of a learning network, thus making a distinct link to learning and structure. Earlier in this chapter I defined learning action theories as the norms and values that individuals or organisations hold specifically regarding the concept of learning. In this respect I have already covered this element of the learning structures under my analysis of learning actors; it seems to fit most comfortably here in the application of the LNT. Arguably, then, the learning climate of a learning network could be repositioned, as the LPR learning network is restricted to a learning process. The concept of a learning climate and its position with the learning network is further explored in Chapter 8.

### **Theoretical Types of Learning Network**

Following analysis of the main components of the case study learning network the case study learning network can now be positioned in the three-dimensional space that allows it to be classified by type. The findings from the case study data analysis were compared to the four learning networks depicted by Poell et al (2000). Below is an outline of each of the networks and how the case study learning network meets or does not meet their characteristics.

#### **1. The liberal learning network**

In this type of network the focus is on meeting the needs of the individual and enabling individual employees to create their own learning activities. Evidence of the student employees' individual input was found in their involvement in the planning of learning activities during the learning programme. The overall programme planning and development, however, was not in their hands but was rather directed by central learning actors from the social care organisation, the OU and UNISON. While this network does have liberal elements it cannot be described as a fully liberal learning network.

## 2. The vertical learning network

Vertical learning networks are characterised by linear planning of the learning activities (ibid). For example, following the linear process outlined on p117, the development of learning policies leads to the planning and execution of learning programmes. Such a simple linear process was not found in the formation of the case study LPR. While policy such as widening participation initiatives did impact on the development of the partnership, specific learning policies and directions that resulted from the learning programme were identified as under review in the organisation.

## 3. The horizontal learning network

This type of learning network provides a better fit for the case study learning network. It has no pre-designed learning policies. Learning activities are process-orientated and aimed at problem solving. The horizontal learning network exists in organisations where there are egalitarian relationships between the actors, and the learning climate emphasises the integration of learning (Poell et al 2000). It was difficult to ascertain the nature of the relationships between the learning actors in the case study learning network. Much of the evidence indicates power and influence in key individuals. There is some evidence of a learning climate that integrates learning and work, but this was reported as dependent upon managers and specific teams within the social care organisation.

## 4. The external learning network

The external network, as the name implies, is coordinated from outside the organisation. It could be argued that the case study learning network is therefore strongly characteristic of an

external learning network due to its partnership basis and the central role and influence of key actors from other organisations. However, the motivation for providing the social work qualification – to meet the recruitment and retention needs within the social care organisation – was internal. The motivations of the external actors, namely the OU and UNISON, included their internal needs to gain new students and increase membership. However, they all fulfil one shared objective: widening student participation in the social work qualification.

It appears from the application of LNT interpretative framework that the case study learning partnership is predominantly comprised of characteristics that fall into the categories of the horizontal and external learning networks.

Not only do the learning network theorists describe and explain the learning network, they also address what they called ‘the labour network’ and depict the relationship between the two. The labour network addresses how work is organised. The interpretative framework applied to the case study data was limited to the application of the learning network, as the case study was not conducted with the aim of uncovering the social care organisation’s labour network and its connection to learning. It is possible to hypothesise about the type of labour network that exists based on the outcome of the application of the learning network interpretation. Poell et al (2000) propose that:

LNT assumes certain relationships between the learning network and the labour network of an organisation...a liberal learning network is likely to be found in entrepreneurial work, a vertical learning network is expected in machine-bureaucratic

work, a horizontal learning network is related to adhocratic<sup>2</sup> group work, and an external learning network is most common for professional work. (p40)

One distinct problem uncovered through the use of LNT is that there appears to be a conceptual shift between the elements of the interpretative framework and identifying theoretical types of learning network. It was expected that by following a description and outline of some of the structures, action theories and processes from the case study data uncovering the underlying theoretical type of learning network would be straightforward. However, interpreting the type of learning network from the case study data relied more heavily on analysis of the very mental operations that, the learning network theorists argue, are unnecessary for an interpretation that ‘focuses mainly on what happens between people as they interact socially, rather than on what happens within a person’s mind’ (p34).

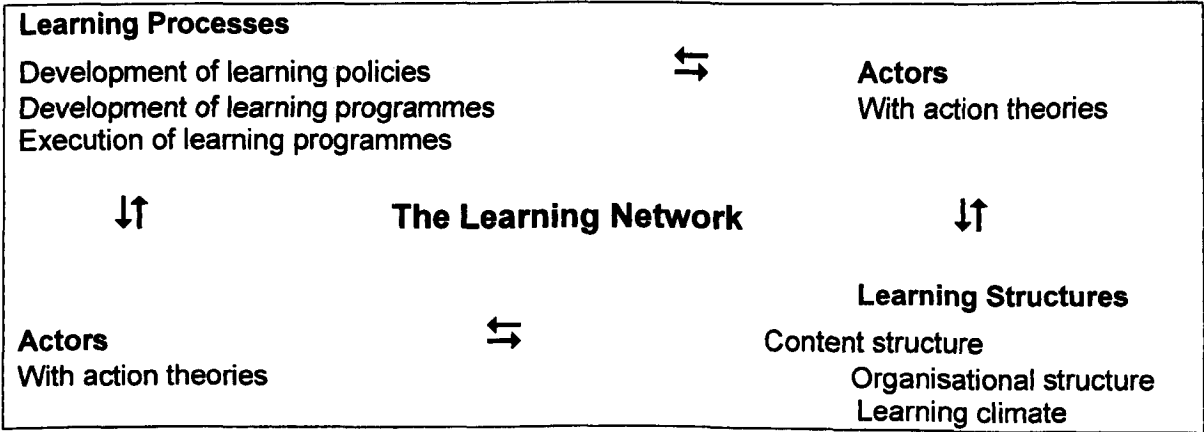
Poell et al (ibid) acknowledge the importance of actors’ learning action theories in guiding their actions, and this reliance on actors in the network is illustrated in Figure 5.1, page 117, which depicts a linear flow in the network from structures to actors, actors to processes and processes to structure. According to Poell et al (ibid), LNT is merely a description and an interpretation of the social-organisational learning activities, processes and strategies. To strengthen the applicability of LNT perhaps these authors need to further incorporate and recognise the vital role of mental activities, processes and strategies in LNT and the interwoven aspects of sociology and psychology that their theory advocates.

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<sup>2</sup> Alvin Toffler popularized the term adhocracy in his 1970’s book ‘Future Shock’. It describes a type of management system in which hierarchies are disbanded and all individuals in an organisation are given the power to make decisions. Toffler predicted that this type of management system would eventually supplant bureaucracy.

Another question asked here is whether this linear model of the learning network is accurate for application to the case study. Figure 5.4 details a linear relationship that assumes that learning action theories must result in learning policy and programmes before they can have an impact of any learning structure. Some of the case study evidence appears to suggest otherwise. Feedback from one social care organisation actor discussed earlier revealed how, based on action theories about learning and not merely learning processes, the social care organisation is now moving away from a widening participation model of social work qualification. It is now offering the shorter postgraduate route to employees who have already proved their educational competence. This alternative flow between actor, process and structure is outlined in Figure 5.4 below.

Figure 5.4: Revised learning network of an organisation



### **Chapter Summary**

A number of approaches and theories pertaining to learning in organisations were identified in the literature review. The first part of this chapter explored learning network theory (LNT) in detail to support and increase understanding of the use of the theory in the data analysis/discussion chapters. In the second part of the chapter the theory was applied to the Learning Partnership Route (LPR) to describe the actors, processes and structure in this learning partnership. Evidence was incorporated from both the interview data and the documentary evidence gathered during the case study. In the final part of this chapter, the type of learning network that the LPR case study constitutes was examined. The application of LNT and the interpretative framework to the case study data uncovered the learning actors' action theories about the learning organisation and the SCIE characteristics. It also uncovered a number of problems with LNT, which are elaborated on in Chapter 8. Chapter 6 focuses more substantially on the LPR learning actors' action theories relating to formal learning, and in Chapter 7 their action theories about informal learning are investigated.

## 6. Formal Learning in the LPR

The nature of formal learning was considered in the literature review chapter and defined by Marsick and Watkins (1990: p12) as ‘typically institutionally sponsored, classroom based, and highly structured’. This research aims to uncover not only the formal but also the informal learning that occurs as a part of this network. Both types of learning are considered important in the SCIE learning characteristics and by the learning network theorists themselves. Poell (2006 p153) states that a learning project ‘can take place in a formalised training setting organised by HRD professionals, but learning is also brought about informally by the employees themselves in their everyday work situation’. A more thorough analysis of the nature of informal learning in social work and the interaction between formal and informal learning is presented Chapter 7. The focus of this chapter is solely on the formal learning aspects of the LPR learning network, and in particular on the role of UNISON in this process. This addresses research objective 2b; to investigate the role of UNISON in formal learning through the LPRSW degree. For the purpose of the data analysis in this chapter, I define formal learning more precisely than Marsick and Watkins (1990) as the preplanned and structured learning which occurs as a result of the LPRSW degree.

In the learning network, learning is thought to take place when the actors acquire and develop action theories. Poell et al (2000) utilize the notion of action theories based on the work of Argyris and Schon (1978), postulating that:

Action theories encompass the norms, ideas and rules that more or less explicitly guide and legitimise people’s actions. (p33)



In Chapter 5 I defined learning action theories as ‘the norms and values that individuals or organisations hold in relation specifically to the concept of learning’. Here I investigate the LPR learning network learning actors’ learning action theories on formal learning.

A number of themes relating to the role of UNISON in formal learning in the learning partnership network were identified in the case study: the function of UNISON in the partnership; the strengths of UNISON’s involvement in formal learning; the weaknesses or problems resulting from its involvement; benefits to UNISON resulting from the learning partnership; and the future of UNISON-sponsored formal learning in social care organisations. These themes are discussed alongside excerpts from the interview transcripts below.

Following this, evidence from the research data is used to explore what I term a ‘formal learning network’ and to identify what type of learning network this represents, based on the descriptions by Poell et al (2000) outlined in Chapter 5.

## **Function**

### **Engaging the employer and employees**

UNISON’s role in LPR in engaging the employer and employees emerged during the case study with a description of and reflections on how it engaged with the social care organisation to implement the formal learning qualification. One UNISON actor spoke in detail about what s/he called the ‘ingredients’ of a successful learning partnership, including the need to establish a relationship and build trust, and mentioned some of the challenges in this process.

The single ingredient that I’ve identified since I’ve been here is the length of the relationship between UNISON and the employer and the trust that’s built up through that relationship. These two things working together appear to be what give you the platform to move on. That’s not easy, because people and managers in the local

authority and Unison change. At its very best it is this longevity and trust that actually help people work out what are the best programmes and how they can put them into practice. At the moment that's noticeable by being rare, and what we've got to move towards is a situation where it's rooted and built into the longevity of the relationship. (Participant E, National Learning and Workforce Officer: UNISON)

In addition to UNISON's part in establishing relationships with learning actors at management level, its role in engaging with employees and potential students is revealed in the quote above, along with the perceived importance of this role and how UNISON might have been better placed than the OU to engage with the employer. The OU's relationship with the social care employees centred only on the social work degree. UNISON communicated with the social care employees on a wider set of issues covering significantly more than learning. Through this wider role they were able to establish a greater level of trust.

One of the key things is trust, and often trade union representatives on the shop floor at the workplace have got the trust of groups of workers that employers perhaps find it difficult to get the trust of, especially those who are outside the usual frameworks, people who have trouble with literacy and numeracy for example. I think trade unions can be a trusted partner for workers and also they can be a pressure group for workers at the workplace, as they are nationally. (Participant E, National Learning and Workforce Officer: UNISON)

One way in which UNISON may have gained that trust is illustrated in the excerpt below from an OU learning partnership actor who highlighted the role of the UNISON learning representatives as a role model in the work place.

I think to some extent it's that Unison has an image of being on the side of the underdog, whereas a university, even the Open University, can feel a bit daunting. If you have got an intermediary in the work place, as the learning reps are supposed to

be, [they are an illustration of] somebody who has managed [workplace] learning and gained the benefits from it. (Participant H, Sub Dean for External Relations, OU)

Social care learning partnership actors indicated that they believed that UNISON had a successful partnership with educational providers such as the OU and Ruskin College. It may well be on this basis and evidence of previous successful collaborations that encouraged the employer to run the LPRSW qualification. The excerpt below is taken from a social care learning organisation employee and indicates how the perceived success of the relationship between the OU and UNISON led them to expand the range of formal work-based learning qualifications available to employees.

UNISON works quite well and in partnership with the Open University. We have been offering their Understanding Management course and are possibly looking at [offering] the children's one and one or two others. (Participant P, Job Development Manager, Social Care Organisation)

What stands out as a significant theme in the learning partnership in the above quotes is the importance of trust. Interpersonal trust is currently receiving attention in the academic literature on human resources development (HRD). Song et al (2009) explore the effect of the relationship between interpersonal trust and organisational commitment on learning organisation culture. Their results indicate that the learning organisation culture acts as a mediating variable between interpersonal trust and organisational commitment, thus providing a clear link between the learning organisation culture and interpersonal trust. Song et al (ibid) suggest that while the impact of a learning culture on performance-related variables such as job satisfaction has previously been explored, 'interpersonal trust as one of the basic components for enhancing the learning organisation culture has not been studied by HRD

researchers' (p148). They conclude that the interaction between the constructs of interpersonal trust, learning organisation culture and organisational commitment should be considered in the planning of HRD interventions and programs.

The findings from this case study and the identification of UNISON's role in gaining the employers' and employees' trust with the aim of implementing a formal learning program in the social care organisation again highlights the link between interpersonal trust, learning culture and organisational commitment. Interpersonal trust is a key construct here: as Participant E describes, it was the role of key UNISON representatives to build trust through interpersonal relationships which would enable commitment to learning at an organisational level. This LPR case study provides a different take on the interaction between the three constructs to that provided by Song et al (ibid). Evidence from the case study provides a different picture: here, trust is believed to have enabled organisational commitment to the provision of formal learning for employees. This is not to say that cause and effect have been established.

Only one alternative viewpoint was expressed, by a learning partnership actor who believed that UNISON was seen as having a high level of power with central government, for which reason it was treated with a certain amount of suspicion by the other learning actors involved.

So UNISON had a lot of power and the employers were afraid of them...There's bound to be people at the employer and the OU who are suspicious of UNISON. (Participant F, Consultant, UNISON)

Several physical and tangible ways in which UNISON engaged with the social care organisation employers and employees were described. This included providing incentives

such as an annual book allowance to student employees. Promotional activities were also used to inform employers not just about the formal learning opportunities but also about learning policy and initiatives such as the skills pledge:

The Union has (for the last four years) had regional development organisers in place. Their job has partly been to work with employers and to get local UNISON branches up and running with us. We also work at a national level around promotion. We produce documents, speak at conference and do presentations at a national level. So the strategy if you like is making sure that the regions are equipped to promote and respond... If we are promoting the skills pledge [for example] you try and get employers to sign up which then allows us to talk to an employer about a wide range of provision. You can say to them: 'There's no point in having people with skills for life level 2, you need then to give them the opportunity to complete level 3'. It's about making that initial contact at a local level and making sure you're able to engage all the way through. (Participant C: Membership Development Officer, UNISON)

The findings from the data analysis indicate that UNISON engaged with employers and employees by a number of means based on having established good relationships of mutual trust with employers, employees and the OU.

### **The role of central UNISON actors**

The learning actors described the role played by UNISON's head office in the LPR.

Interviews conducted with employees of UNISON's Learning and Organising Services (LAOS) department revealed its key role in formal learning. The excerpt below reveals how UNISON provided learning opportunities not only to its activist<sup>1</sup> but also to its non-activist members.

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<sup>1</sup> Employees may be members of UNISON without having an active role in their local branch, in their workplace or in the wider national and international campaigns. Employees who take part in these activities are referred to by Unison as activists.

We provide [learning] to our activist members, these are the volunteer people who represent their members and who run our branches and we also support the learning of our non-activist members. (Participant C, Membership Development Officer, UNISON)

Formal learning programmes such as the LPR were also offered to non-UNISON members.

We were aware from day one when we were presenting the case to employers that we couldn't say to the employers, and we wouldn't want to say to the employers, to be perfectly honest with you, that only UNISON members' could do this. We know the employers wouldn't want that and they couldn't do that because there would be grievance, obviously. So we said to the employers: 'This is available to all your staff and we'll obviously talk to those people about belonging to the trade union and why it's a good thing 'and we never had any problems at all with employers' responses. It was always recognised that it was a legitimate thing for us to do. (Participant A, Head of Open College, UNISON)

The data analysis revealed a number of ways in which central UNISON actors were involved in the learning programme. These included:

- programme planning and setup
- attendance at stakeholder meetings
- financial support.

They were not, however, found to be involved in many of the learning activities outlined earlier in Table 5.6, which is adapted below to show the formal learning activities in which central UNISON did play a role.

**Table 6.1: LPR formal learning activities in which central UNISON learning actors played a role**

<b>Learning Activities</b>	<b>UNISON input into formal learning activity?</b>
Practice learning courses	
Non-practice learning courses	
Bridging workshops	
Paid study leave	
Workshops	
Local Management Group	✓
Stakeholder meeting	✓
Workshops for line managers and practice assessors	
Support group for students	

Central office UNISON LPR learning actors were only involved in two of the nine LPR learning activities outlined in the LPR route guide (The OU 2006). What is evident from the case study data, however, as highlighted by Participant E below, is that this role was significant in getting workplace learning programmes such as the LPR off the ground and gaining support from key organisations and actors outside the network.

Sometimes employers need to be reminded of their obligations. They are in the business of providing top quality public services which we all want, and we as a union want to see top quality public services. But sometimes in doing that you can take the eye off the ball a little bit, off learning and what it can achieve for your workers. If you look at the training statistics from local government, the people who get the best deal are the people who have got the most training. The people who have the least training have got the worst deal, and that's no good. Unions are there to constantly remind employers of that and to be ambassadors for giving people a fair deal through learning. So I think those things are critical. I think the bigger reason is that trade unions are legitimate stakeholders in a modern democracy and they should be recognised as such by governments and by employers, and however difficult it gets at times, that function is critical in a modern world where change is sweeping over all of us all the time. (Participant E, National Learning and Workforce Officer, UNISON)

Here I found a distinct problem with the application of the interpretative framework to the case study data. I attempted to identify where in the LPR learning network such key organisations and actors would be placed. The most rational position is in the structures component under learning climate, as this is defined as the norms and values regarding learning. Poell and Moorsel (1996), however, limit the learning climate of a learning network to that which is enclosed within the structure of the learning network (see Figure 5.1 on page 117 for a reminder of the components of the learning network as defined by Poell et al (2000)).

Applying the interpretative framework to the case study data unmasked the limited but important role of central UNISON learning actors in the LPR learning network. This led to the identification of a limitation to LNT: it is hard to know where to locate these actors and the impact of outside organisations, as they cannot be positioned in the learning climate as defined by Poell et al (ibid).

### **Strengths of UNISON's involvement in formal learning**

One of the themes that emerged from the data was the strengths of having UNISON involved as a key actor in the learning network, which included:

- meeting the aim of widening participation in the social work qualification;
- providing funding to run the programme;
- sensitivity in its engagement with employees;
- providing a flexible programme for the work-based route;
- troubleshooting programme issues;
- involvement in post-qualification celebration and employee achievement.



Each of these strengths is discussed below with illustrative excerpts from the case study interviews.

## **Widening Participation**

The excerpts below from the interviews show how the LPR encouraged the participation of social care employees who had no traditional educational qualifications. A summary of the educational background of the LPR students can be found in the introduction chapter (Figures 1.1-1.3). None of the LPR students from this social care organisation had studied for a higher education qualification.

I think the strength of [the LPR] is that it's linked to the original widening participation ideas, particularly giving students who don't have a traditional background a route into social work education. (Participant G, Staff Tutor, OU)

You bring in people that otherwise wouldn't be able [to study], and in our view quite often you are bringing in people with very strong experience of doing the job [social care]. They bring a new perspective, not just to learning but to the teaching as well. It allows people to carry on working whilst studying. Let's face it, older people who are studying at degree level through this route actually like their jobs and they don't want to leave them. They don't want to threaten their incomes or their routines or childcare patterns. So it allows them to carry on doing their job. (Participant C, Membership Development Officer, UNISON)

That's why the UNISON/OU partnership is so important, because we have a massive high quality national institution [the OU] which is prepared to work with UNISON in order to fulfil its mission which is, in common with UNISON, to widen participation in education. (Participant E, National Learning and Workforce Officer, UNISON)

I don't know if you picked this one up, but UNISON didn't really want graduates, people who already have a first degree, doing the course. One or two had actually slipped into the first cohort. The employer and the OU came together when they were selecting students for the second cohort and there were quite a lot more graduates [put forward by the employer]. The UNISON learning actors came to the routine management meetings and had a big row because we didn't think that they [the employer] had tried hard enough to get non-graduates on the course. (Participant F, Consultant, UNISON)

The comments by UNISON and OU learning partnership actors indicate the role that UNISON played in ensuring that social care employees given a place on the learning partnership had not previously studied for a higher educational qualification.

Evidence from telephone interviews with some of the LPR students also confirms the beneficial role of UNISON in widening participation in the social work degree. In the excerpt below, Student 9 details how s/he would not have had the opportunity to complete the social work qualification had it not been for the LPR and the funding provided by UNISON.

My previous department had made enquires with my manager there who was really sort of saying to me that even though she would personally like to support me in applying for a degree, because the budget in that department was quite small and I was the only social work representative there she wouldn't be able to release me on a regular basis to do the course... I asked my new manager and she said that if the council do fund more courses then she would put me forward...and that was in August and then in October, November time she came up to me saying that [the LPR] course were available and she had nominated me. (Student 9)

Widening participation in higher education is still one of the key priorities of the Department for Employment, Innovation and Skills (DIUS 2009) and the Higher Education Funding

Council for England (HEFCE). The latter set out a number of performance targets aimed at meeting the challenges set out in the Leitch Review of Skills (Leitch 2006). These include increasing the number of participants in higher education in the workforce. UNISON's role in helping to achieve to this goal has been shown to be successful in the case study. In its 2009 updated strategic plan, HEFCE (2009) makes many references to the need to work in partnership with funders, key stakeholders and further and higher education institutions. It does not mention the role of trade unions in this, however. This case study reveals the key role that a trade union can have not only in encouraging employees who have not previously had the opportunity to participate in higher education but also in ensuring that this was put into practice. UNISON's strength in this role is confirmed by the OU participant (see below) who identified how UNISON is better placed than the Open University to market widening participation to employers.

I have never doubted that UNISON was a way of the OU reaching widening participation students and the OU has a particular difficulty in doing this. This seemed to be a good way of reaching those students in a way that the OU wouldn't be able to do just through marketing or setting up events locally. (Participant H, Sub Dean for External Relations, OU)

## **Funding**

A key way in which UNISON was perceived to have contributed to the LPR was through its monetary contribution, which supported students with an annual book allowance.

UNISON was vital as the creative force behind it; they put the money where their mouth is. If they are going to pay for something they do. That was important I think to get this off the ground.

(Participant D: Programme Tutor, OU)

When it was a two-year programme it was really short and the students needed the additional time, and I think UNISON has provided that. It really, really improved their learning: there is no question. They also had an additional book allowance which was really a benefit to them. (Participant B, Lecturer in Social Work, OU)

The fact that UNISON was able to provide a substantial amount of funding for the first cohort of LPR students who undertook the Diploma in Social Work is important here in the discussion on its role. The social care organisation funded the second cohort of students on the LPRSW degree. The funding provided by UNISON for the first cohort enabled the employers to see the benefits to the organisation of this workplace learning qualification and encouraged them enough to continue with the LPR and widening participation initiatives.

### **Sensitivity in engaging with social care employees**

The comments below made by a social care organisation learning partnership actor indicates one of the reasons that UNISON appears to be well-placed to help to expand formal learning in social care organisations and why it is able to engage with employees where employers and higher education institutions fail.

I think one of the things that UNISON does is enable people to acknowledge learning in a different way. So nobody did a literacy course; they did a written communication at work skills course. I think that enabled the people who had learning needs to be approached in a much more sympathetic and sensitive way. If a manager had come to us and said an employee has a skills for life need we'd have found a way of dealing with it. I certainly think trade unions facilitate that better than employers or the traditional educational provider. (Participant L, Training and Development Officer/Consultant, Social Care Organisation)

### **Flexibility of the work-based social work qualification**

A further way in which the LPR was deemed successful was in the flexibility of the workplace learning programme for the students. The case study revealed that this route to a social work qualification via both the diploma and the degree allowed a more flexible programme of work for the students than the normal route to the qualification with the OU, and illustrated how UNISON had helped in this. The comments of an OU learning partnership actor below show that in his/her role as a tutor s/he had a certain amount of control over the programme content.

UNISON really gave me an incredible free hand in that middle year. It was very unusual for an OU tutor to be able to work with students to devise a programme that was going to meet their needs. It was really very good.

(Participant B, Lecturer in Social Work, OU)

An LPR student also described the how flexibility of the programme meant that the students could negotiate various elements of the programme's structure at the stakeholder meetings.

The quote below illustrates one instance of how they were able to do this:

Once we entered our second year we found it hard at times, so we renegotiated the bridging workshops. The bridging workshops were predominantly there to bridge between Year 1 and 2 and Year 3 and 4 etc...but actually it was useful to have two of those bridging workshops in the gap between terms...during the course itself to get everyone together to be able to air concerns and any fears. (Student 9)

## **Problem solving**

An additional strength of UNISON's involvement was how it helped to solve the problems that occurred at various stages of the partnership, particularly in the planning stages:

Mostly UNISON was constructive. They were helping line managers to understand that they needed to release students for the workshops and things and that were done locally. I can't think of any students who tried to use UNISON to support them over something dodgy. (Participant F, Consultant, UNISON)

The literature review explored consideration for the role of line management in workplace learning. Gibb (2003), Mumford (1996) and others point to the importance of the role of line management in achieving both formal and informal learning in the workplace. The learning partnership case study showed that UNISON played a role in helping line managers to understand the social work qualification and the needs of the students. The excerpt below reveals how it not only helped line managers to understand the students' study needs and requirements but also played a key role in enabling them to start the social work programme by helping them to gain the Maths and English qualifications required by the General Social Care Council (GSCC).

I began to realise that some of students didn't have some of the entrance requirements. There was a huge flurry of activity to get each of those students up to the required standard. The social care organisation had completely overlooked this, they had not heard the OU say it and had not heard me say it and had not read the literature that we sent them. The OU sends out so much stuff that it's very easy to miss things...basically the students should not have been registered. UNISON steered the students towards a programme that they could do online and the credit they got for that programme allowed them to be considered to be at the right level of literacy. I guess it's that sort of thing that UNISON could do, to continue to encourage students to learn at often quite a basic level so they are ready for the later stage. The social care organisation were just somehow were blinkered to it – you know asked what the problem is. But it was a major problem because really under the General Social Care Council terms of accepting students on the course we should not have registered those students.  
(Participant D, Programme Tutor, OU)

Problem-solving is highlighted in the academic literature on partnerships. Buono (1997) considers the various factors that impact on partnership development and enhancement and lists problem-solving amongst other variable elements of a strategic partnership that influence partnership success, suggesting that 'emphasis should be placed on correcting mistakes rather

than downplaying their importance'. UNISON's role in solving problems when mistakes had been made in registering students for the Learning Partnership not only rectified the problem but also achieved this with sufficient speed to enable the social work students to commence their studies.

### **Continued support post-qualification**

The local UNISON learning partnership actor described the on-going relationship they had with the LPR graduates as they continued to support the employees following their qualification, and also UNISON's role in further formal learning.

I'm interested in nurturing newly qualified social workers...so supporting those kinds of issues around salary and going for the post-qualification courses and also then whether they were being put on adult protection. (Participant N, Educational Convenor/Single Status Officer, UNISON)

### **Celebration of formal learning**

Buono (1997) lists the celebration and reinforcement of partnership success as good practice in enhancing strategic partnerships. This practice was evident in the LPR and was referred to by a UNISON learning actor who highlighted an annual event run by the social care organisation which recognises not only the LPR students but all the employees who had participated in workplace learning:

Every year there is a celebration where members of the social care organisation staff who are involved in any further training or qualification are eligible to come. They 're given a book token and a few other things and there are a few words from the Chief Exec. So UNISON has been involved very briefly in that, but I can't think of anything else. (Participant N, Educational Convenor/Single Status Officer, UNISON)

## **Weaknesses/ problems of UNISON's involvement**

### **UNISON input at the local level**

A UNISON learning partnership actor suggested that this type of partnership with employers could only be maintained with more momentum and input from UNISON working directly with employers at the local level.

We need more local project workers attached to employers who can promote UNISON's work continuously, because it's that level of input, staffing and commitment that's needed to keep the culture of learning at the top of the employers' agenda. So what I've come to understand, and I don't think I understood this at all when I started, is that if you don't have these [local project workers] in place you will always be behind the pace. You will never be able to move, to continuously develop lifelong leaning learning courses through the Open University partnership, and as a result you lose momentum. (Participant E, National Learning and Workforce Officer, UNISON)

### **Lack of clarity about UNISON's role in the partnership**

Some of the learning partnership actors, both students and OU staff, were unclear about the role of UNISON in the LPR.

Well to be honest I haven't known what [UNISON's] role is. (Participant G, Staff Tutor, OU)

Buono (1997) recognises that communication about roles and responsibilities is critical, and recommends that one individual in each of the partnership organisations is responsible for ensuring that learning actors are all aware of all participants' roles and responsibilities. This



would have enhanced the LPR and potential similar collaborations between UNISON, the OU (or other higher education institutions) and social care organisations.

## **Benefits to UNISON**

Stuart (1994) believes that the benefit that these learning partnerships bring to the trade unions is overstated and that unions are challenged by the difficulties they face in getting employers to meet formal agreements at this time. However, a number of benefits were uncovered in the present case study.

## **Membership Recruitment**

Learning actors from the three partnership organisations listed the benefits that they believed UNISON had gained from their participation and contribution to the LPR. The discussion below reveals that the union gained some new members in the form of the students who, if they were not already members, joined UNISON to become eligible for the book allowance. However, member activity had not increased as a result of the LPR:

**Participant N** (Educational Convenor/ Single Status Officer, UNISON): The students were not all UNISON members for a start so they all signed up because, certainly the original group were eligible and other groups since then to a book grant that UNISON provided of £350. So it made sense to actually join UNISON to be eligible for that.

**Researcher:** How about those who graduated with the diploma. Has UNISON seen any changes in membership or a more active role from those graduates?

**Participant N:** I don't think we have necessarily picked up any new stewards...I just think that newly qualified social workers have got a lot on their minds and they need to concentrate actually, so I don't necessarily hassle them too much, but suggest it if it comes up.

McIlroy (2008) contemplates the role of trade unions during the prior ten years under New Labour and reviews the work of Rainbird et al (2009). He names what he calls ‘the transfer effects’ for trade unions involved in workplace learning, as proposed by various authors. These effects are the reinforcement of loyalties of existing members; increased activism amongst members; and increased membership of the unions.

Waddington and Kerr (2009) examine the development of UNISON’s National Organising and Recruitment Strategy (NORS) since 1995 and highlight how UNISON now links recruitment to a range of other activities, for example Return to Learn and other lifelong learning programs. The LPRSW degree provides a good example of this recruitment strategy in action, but no significant evidence of its success was found in the case study.

This chapter has predominantly focused on the impact and concerns of the learning partnership from the point of view of UNISON. Heyes (2000) discusses the implications for the employers and employees. The TUC emphasises that unions should encourage qualifications for employees (Heyes 2000), as there is evidence that trainees view the certification of their learning as important . This was confirmed in an interview with a UNISON representative who commented that UNISON focuses on formal learning and training in the workplace because it knows that employees want some form of recognition and it is easier for the trade union to engage them in learning in this way as opposed to trying to initiate informal learning in the workplace.

### **The future of UNISON-sponsored formal learning in social care organisations**

The learning actors were asked for their opinions on the future of the LPRSW degree. Not all interviewees responded to this question, but the answers of those that did are included in the discussion below.

### **The social care organisation learning partnership actor's response**

Quite simply the MSc is two years, so this is a quicker turn around with [the advantage of taking on someone with] a proven track record, somebody who's done a first degree. I get the impression there is an increased need in terms of professional standards, in terms of written reports and stuff like that, so if you're a manager and you know somebody has completed a first degree they have obtained those necessary standards. I think the whole support of staff on graduate and postgraduate level qualifications, and workforce priority is all being reviewed. (Participant O, Social Work Development Officer, Social Care Organisation)

According to this participant the longer length of the degree programme led the social care organisation to sponsor employees on the shorter MSc postgraduate route to social work, a qualification, which is not run in partnership with UNISON.

### **The Unison learning partnership actor's response**

The UNISON learning partnership actors were asked their opinions on the future of social care learning partnership:

**Researcher:** Do you know where UNISON is hoping or planning to take learning partnership now?

**Participant C (UNISON: Membership Development Officer):** Probably to more employers. That is what's at the heart of it. We want more employers to offer this opportunity. I mean for us, there's a reason for that as we are more likely to keep people in [UNISON] membership and paying the full rate of subscription, so we want more employers to use the route. We want to convince employers that is what they

should do. What we want is, whether it's through us and the Open University or through another university or college, that opportunity [for workplace learning] to be available to our members. We want the opportunity to be available not just to those working as care assistants, but those working in jobs that might be threatened, such as housing. The growth of registration means that everyone in the workforce will probably have to have a qualification and need to demonstrate that they are doing some learning every year. There is this requirement to demonstrate that you are updating your skills and knowledge.

**Researcher:**

How do you see it being left, then, in four years time?

**Participant E** (UNISON: National Learning and Workforce Officer): That's a really difficult question again... it does mean more staff our end and more at the Open University's end dedicated to making the partnership work a success. I'd like to think that those staff had a clear vision of where they were headed and that UNISON had fallen in completely to the vision as had the Open University. If we could see the best practice that we have begun to establish becoming typical of employers in the public sector. So what I want is a structure at all levels which enables that to happen. That does mean that staffing at all levels, as I said earlier, is very important. Commitment is important at all levels, and having a learning offer which is not just suitable but is actually integrated with the working lives of the people it is offered to. I would like to see tailor-made courses, for example in social care. In adult social care there should be an openings course and that should bring people onto the learning progression instead of them having to do an open more general Open University openings course.

Participant F suggested that the reason the LPR was discontinued was down to the resources that the OU was able to put into it, and Participant F indicated that the management and structure of the OU programmes does not easily lend itself to a more flexible social work degree.

Well, I think you may have picked up from this conversation that I think a lot of the responsibility for the fact that the LPR didn't roll out nationally was with the Open

University. When it needed some real muscle to get the regional people behind it, it wasn't there from the OU. The OU generally was very inflexible and bureaucratic about dates and things, so you had to start it *then* and finish *then* and could only start once in a year and it all had to be done in a standard way. You'd think the OU would flexible because it is an open learning organisation, but it was exactly the other way round. (Participant F, Consultant, UNISON)

### **The OU learning partnership actor's response**

UNISON's view was echoed by one of the OU learning actors, who highlighted that tensions had developed between the learning actors involved.

**Researcher:** What has the social care organisation gone on to do since then?

**Participant D** (Programme Tutor, Open University): It was to do with a particular student who had special needs. People have found it difficult to accept her as a qualified social worker because of her personality, and therefore they have questioned how she ever managed to get through the course. They have said that the OU should never have allowed her to get through the course. [The social care organisation employers] put students instead on the Masters programme so they clearly are looking not so much at a widening participation approach but a grow your own graduates approach. I think some of that is because of that case I have just told you about. The students have been very demanding, they've actually demanded a lot more study time than other students have had, they've demanded a lot more resources from the sponsoring agency and they have been in quite a strong position in terms of their power over the agency. I think the agency itself might have felt a little bit browbeaten by the students.

In summary, the general consensus amongst the LPR learning actors was that the LPR had been discontinued in favour of the shorter, postgraduate route.

## **The Formal Learning Network**

The evidence from the case study data on formal learning is now used to further identify the type of network that the learning partnership is illustrative of. In the previous chapter the four different types of learning network outlined by Poell et al (2000) were discussed in relation to the LPR. An exploration of formal learning has provided illustrations of the liberal elements of the network. The widening participation principle upon which the learning partnership was established, which enabled employees without further or higher education to apply for a social work qualification flexible enough to meet their needs, reveals a certain liberality in the learning network processes.

The only evidence of vertical characteristics such as linear planning can be seen in the processes that result from the students' social work qualification: for example from their initial application to registration, studying for the qualification and finally graduation. This was evidenced in the feedback from the students themselves and from UNISON members who talked about its future involvement with LPR students. Contrary to the discussions in the previous chapter, the case study evidence presented in this chapter points away from the conclusion that the learning network is horizontal. A horizontal learning network is said to be process-orientated with no predesigned learning policies (Poell et al 2000). While the LPR was not found to have been initiated by the employing social care organisation policies, case study data presented in this chapter reveal that the learning network was established on the basis of widening participation policies by both UNISON and the OU. So in terms of the learning network interpretation, what needs to be clarified is whether just the policies and

processes of the employing organisation are key to the interpretation or whether the policies and processes of the organisations to which key actors belong are worthy of more consideration in this case study learning network.

The final type of learning network outlined by Poell et al (2000) is the external learning network, and in the previous chapter I have argued that the LPR was predominantly indicative of this type of learning network. The previous paragraph highlighted the key influence of external actors. It appears that the widening participation policies and perceptions of the outside key learning actors, as well as the Union Learning Fund, were indeed influential (Union Learning Fund 2010).

Based on the case study evidence used to illustrate this formal learning network, it can be argued that it is representative of an external learning network. I employ further case study data analysis and discussion of the role of UNISON in informal learning in the social care organisation in the next chapter to further explore the type of learning network that this case study represents. However, caution must be taken with this interpretation, as this chapter has focused predominantly on the role of UNISON and thus perhaps encourages the identification of the learning network as external. A more equal analysis of the roles of each of the organisations in the learning network would perhaps lead to a different interpretation of a learning network. This, however, was not within the remit of the case study, and the data gathered in this case study would not provide a clear enough picture for such an analysis.

## **Chapter Summary**

The focus of this chapter is solely on the formal learning aspects of the Learning Partnership Route's learning network, and in particular on UNISON's role in this, in order to address research objective 2b: to investigate the role of UNISON in formal learning through the Learning Partnership Route to Social Work degree. A number of themes were identified relating to UNISON's role in formal learning in the learning partnership network: its function in the partnership, the strengths of its involvement in formal learning, the weaknesses or problems resulting from its involvement, benefits to UNISON resulting from the learning partnership, and lastly the future of UNISON-sponsored formal learning in social care organisations. These themes were discussed alongside excerpts from the interview transcripts. Following this, evidence from the research data was used to explore what I have called a formal learning network and to identify what type of learning network this represents, based on descriptions from Poell et al (2000) outlined in Chapter 5.

It is an aim of the research to uncover not only the formal but also the informal learning that occurs as a part of this network. Both types of learning are considered important in the SCIE learning characteristics and by the learning network theorists themselves. Poell (2006) states that a learning program 'can take place in a formalised training setting organised by HRD professionals, but learning is also brought about informally by the employees themselves in their everyday work situation' (p153). A more thorough analysis of the nature of informal learning in social work and the interaction between formal and informal is presented in Chapter 7.



## **7. The interaction between formal and informal learning in the Learning Partnership Route**

In the previous chapter the role of UNISON in formal learning through the Learning Partnership Route to Social Work (LPRSW) degree was analysed and discussed on the basis of the case study data. In summary, UNISON was found to have a number of roles in this formal learning qualification which included engaging with the employer and employees, gaining trust, widening the participation of employees who had not already been through higher education, providing funding, troubleshooting and resolving conflicts between the LPR learning actors involved. The problems arising from UNISON's involvement and the benefits to UNISON were also considered.

In order to thoroughly address the research objectives outlined in the introduction to the thesis, the interaction between formal and informal learning in the LPR learning network is explored here. This analysis is important, as learning in the LPR learning network was not limited to formal learning. In this discussion, consideration is given to the nature of formal and informal learning; to whether these terms are useful to our understanding of workplace learning and LNT and, more importantly, for the case study; and to whether or not they are useful terms to employ in relation to learning in social care. The learning network theorists distinguish between formal and informal learning: Poell (2006) states that a learning program 'can take place in a formalised training setting organised by Human Resource Development (HRD) professionals, but learning is also brought about informally by the employees themselves in their everyday work situation' (p153). This is an unsophisticated distinction, and the author neglects further examination of the concepts of formal and informal learning in his account of LNT.

The concepts of formal, informal and non-formal learning have been outlined and deliberated in the literature. The strength of these concepts and their applicability to debates around workplace learning are evident in their existence in EU policy. In 2001 they were defined in the EU's framework on lifelong learning as follows:

- **Formal learning** consists of learning that occurs within an organised and structured context (formal education, in-company training), and that is designed as learning. It may lead to a formal recognition (diploma, certificate). Formal learning is intentional from the learner's perspective.
- **Non-formal learning** consists of learning embedded in planned activities that are not explicitly designated as learning, but which contain an important learning element. Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view.
- **Informal learning** is defined as learning resulting from daily life activities related to work, family, or leisure. It is often referred to as experiential learning and can to a certain degree be understood as accidental learning. It is not structured in terms of learning objectives, learning time and/or learning support. Typically it does not lead to certification. Informal learning may be intentional but in most cases, it is non-intentional (or 'incidental'/random). (European Commission 2001, p32/33)

The definitions above resulted from attempts by the EU to validate formal and informal learning so that individuals in one member state can have their full range of skills and competences taken into consideration in another. In 2009 the EU also published guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning so that learning that takes place outside learning institutions can be recognised (CEDEFOP 2009).

## Chapter 7: The Interaction between formal and informal learning

Theorists such as Beckett and Hager (2002) propose that informal learning is not only more common but also more effective than formal learning in the workplace. However, they do not provide evidence to support their claims. Informal learning is also disputed in the literature. Billett (2001) contends that there is no such thing, arguing that all learning is formalised to some degree as it takes place in organisations and communities that have formal structures. Despite the critique of Billett's (2001) widely-used concepts it is important to understand and further explore formal and informal learning in relation to applying LNT. These concepts are recognised by the learning network theorists and, as this chapter reveals, UNISON perceived its role in workplace learning as reaching further than the provision of formalised qualifications and training.

In order to address research objectives 2(c) and 3 outlined in the introduction and to discover the interaction between formal and informal learning in the LPR learning network, the learning actors' feedback on informal learning in the LPR is outlined and discussed here (see Appendix B for a summary of all participants and documentary evidence).

### **Informal Learning**

Marsick and Watkins (1990:p12) define informal learning as 'a category that includes incidental learning, may occur in institutions, but is not classroom based or highly structured, and control of learning rests primarily in the hands of the learner'. To investigate the role of UNISON in informal learning, each of the case study participants was asked about informal learning in the social care organisation and the role or potential role of UNISON in this. A number of examples of informal learning were uncovered. In

this chapter, in line with LNT the informal learning actors in the LPR learning network are identified and their roles explored. Then the informal learning action theories of the LPR actors from UNISON, the OU and social care organisation are described and contrasted. Lastly the informal learning network of the LPR and its characteristics are presented.

### Informal Learning Actors

#### Key Actors

Focusing on the different learning actors involved in informal learning revealed the key role of line managers in supporting and encouraging informal learning in their teams. The importance of this role was highlighted by learning actors from all three organisations. The impact of line management's assisting their staff's informal learning is also highlighted in the literature review. Mumford (1996) lists the significance of having line management on board when writing about the resources, structures and culture that may impede successful informal learning in an organisation.

The following excerpt reveals a potential role for UNISON in collaboration with the OU to assist line managers regarding both formal and informal learning. The participant suggests that by meeting with the student's manager formal learning requirements can be met, and in addition to this the future learning needs can be considered.

**Researcher:** Have you heard of the SCIE resource?

**Participant B:** (Lecturer in Social Work, OU): Yes I've seen some of this stuff [refers to SCIE key characteristics]. I suppose all I can do from my perspective is to encourage [the SCIE characteristics] when they're on the course. Some managers were really open to the idea of encouraging learning, whereas some really could

hardly give us the time of day. It varied incredibly. I hoped that we sowed a few seeds by having someone from UNISON and the OU going together to talk with the line manager about what the students' future learning needs were and how these could be addressed in the workplace.

Participant B also talked about how the learning environment can be team-dependent and how UNISON could be involved in helping the OU to educate line managers about the formal and informal learning needs of their social care staff. S/he provided an example of how the OU had taken on this role in the past:

**Researcher:** Why do you think some line managers were more positive than others about learning?

**Participant B** (Lecturer in Social Work, OU): That's very difficult. I mean I don't think it's necessarily when it's the busiest teams. I think there is something about the whole structure of the organisation or team. Some teams clearly have this interest in developing all the things SCIE has identified, whereas others are really much more interested in meeting targets, etcetera, but not in the development of the individual. Some students have tremendous opportunities, and I actually used an approach when I worked with an OU group, meeting personally with their line managers, and I think again some line managers were very interested.

## Informal Learning Action Theories

In the learning network learning is thought to take place when actors acquire and develop action theories. Poell et al (2000) utilize the notion of action theories based on the work of Argyris and Schon (1978), postulating that: 'Action theories encompass the norms, ideas and rules that more or less explicitly guide and legitimise people's actions' (p33). I defined 'learning action theories' in Chapter 5 as 'the norms and values that individuals or organisations hold in relation to specifically to the concept of learning'. In the next

paragraph I describe and examine the LPR learning network learning actors' learning actions theories on informal learning, starting with UNISON.

### **UNISON's learning actors' informal learning action theories**

A key belief that UNISON LPR actors put forward during the interviews was the ease with which they are able to get involved in formal learning in comparison to informal learning, as it seems that formal learning often proves a more tangible reward for employees in recognition of their efforts. This is reflected below in the comments by participant C, who argued that it is easier for UNISON to get involved in formal learning because they believe that a formal qualification is more beneficial to employees, who can then sell their skills on the labour market.

**Researcher:** Do you think formal learning that UNISON is initiating has any influence on informal learning in social care organisations?

**Participant C:** (Membership Development Officer, UNISON): We would never say that we don't support this form of learning or that form of learning as far as I am aware. We want quality public services so that people are going to acquire skills. It's much easier for us to get involved in formal learning, because it's what the union does. We are quite keen that people get recognition for their skills, so we do what we can to support any form of learning – informal learning or formal learning. It's easier for us to get involved in formal learning, and we want people to achieve qualifications at the end because we think that's valuable for them and for the labour market. It's much easier to sell your skills if you've got a piece of paper to go with it.

The limitations of rewards for learning such as the Investors of People award are highlighted by Cook (1997), who argues: 'Its focus on training as opposed to learning

(quite correct in itself) is not the total approach needed to develop organizational learning...How is learning (outside of formal training) measured in this same way?' (p21). One problem for UNISON is the difficulty of recognising and rewarding informal learning. Perhaps if informal learning in the case study social care organisation were rewarded in some way UNISON would be able to extend its role in this area. The approach taken by the EU in recent years to validate both formal and informal in organisations was highlighted earlier in this chapter. Such validation of informal learning could be used more widely by social care organisations so that UNISON is able to engage with informal learning in the same way that it encourages formal learning.

Other comments by UNISON actors related to the way that formal learning can have an impact on all areas of learning in life for the employees and not just on informal learning in the workplace.

**Researcher:** Do you think that all this work and formal education has any influence over the informal learning in the organisation? Is this something UNISON is interested in?

**Participant E:** (National Learning and Workforce Officer, UNISON): It's something we're very interested in, certainly. We do have some evidence, not from the OU partnership, but where we have brought people who have had problems with numeracy and literacy onto our Return to Learn courses and it has had a huge effect on their lives in general. It's not just informal learning in the workplace: it's their capacity to act as ambassadors in the home. They can help with their children's homework and reading skills, and all those things which we know are so such a problem in a lot of working class households. What I do know is that our stuff has a really big impact on the lives of people who come into contact with it, and what I would therefore expect is that they talk about that to their workmates. In that sense

it does have potentially a really big effect on informal learning and encouraging people to take up formal learning as well.

Two key themes can be identified in UNISON's informal learning action theories. The first is that some of the UNISON learning actors believed that formal learning initiated through their involvement, such as the LPR, has an effect not only on informal learning at work but also on the personal lives of the social care employees as it enables lifelong learning. Secondly, informal learning encourages the uptake of formal learning. Here the connection between formal and informal learning can be seen clearly.

### **OU learning actors' informal learning action theories**

The LPR actors from the OU appeared less aware of the potential connection between UNISON's involvement in formal and informal learning for the social care organisation. This is illustrated in the excerpt below. Participant G, however, pinpointed an instance where formal learning through the LPRSW degree seems to have initiated an inductive process of reflection and action, which is a characteristic of informal learning described by Marsick and Volpe (1999). Participant G described a situation where one student took the initiative to set up a work policy which s/he had identified as absent in the workplace. This is evidence of reflection and action during the formal learning as part of the LPRSW qualification:

There isn't any particular thing that the partnership route has done to bring the learning back to the organisation. I think some of the things that students did on their placements added value to the organisation. [For example] one of the things that a couple of students did was going out and creating their own placements. They've gone to departments and to managers who were not offering social work



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placements and said ‘Can I come and be a student here?’, and in a sense done the groundwork. Now there is a placement there for somebody else when they leave. One of the other students didn’t have a law on working policy in his department, so he set up a working party amongst staff from different departments and sections in the adult services. He did the groundwork, for the department so in that way I think they’ve brought the learning into the organisation. (Participant G, Staff Tutor, OU)

Participant G also confirmed the role of line managers as key informal learning actors and the roles of UNISON and the OU in developing learning opportunities for students and reflecting on their continuing learning needs.

**Researcher:** One of the things I want to look at is the way in which UNISON, through the degree and learning partnerships, could help to create a learning culture within the organisation, if at all. Do students continue to learn?

**Participant B:** One hopes that the students were fired with enthusiasm to continue learning. It is very difficult when people are working with huge caseloads and people are working with reorganisation. It is very difficult to maintain that ethos... you would almost need to interview the students who went through it again at a later date.

Participant B highlighted the strength that UNISON could have in ensuring that social care employees are motivated for workplace learning and working towards the development and maintenance of a learning culture, ensuring that they have the capacity to continue learning. S/he also identified that it may be too early to assess the full extent of the interrelationship between formal and informal learning and the impact on the learning culture in the case organisation. Participant D, also from UNISON, indicated that s/he believed UNISON’s strength lay in encouraging learning in social care organisations. It may be that the LPR

students' future learning activities and learning action theories need to be assessed in future years, following their qualification, to fully assess the impact of the formal LPR qualification on informal learning and beyond in the organisation.

**Researcher:** Do you think there are any other ways in which UNISON can be involved to encourage learning in social care organisations?

**Participant D:** (Programme Tutor, OU): That's a tough one! Because I think they do a lot to broker things. I think that's where their strength is: they got people together and talking. What they can do beyond that I really don't know. They have put money into things, which is obviously important, but not something they can continue to do because they are not a bottomless pit of money. I think they can keep encouraging a learning culture.

To conclude, the informal learning action theories (that is, the participants' norms, ideas and rules regarding informal learning in relation to the LPR) in the OU LPR actors' two main points can be identified. First, that these actors do not necessarily see the LPR linking formal and informal learning in the workplace, although they provided some good examples of it taking place. Secondly, UNISON and the OU together communicating with line managers to discuss student's learning needs and support is essential.

### **Social care organisation learning actors' informal learning action theories**

The social care organisation LPR learning network actors were able to provide some good examples of informal learning by employees. Participant O provided examples of job shadowing and secondment as routes to informal learning in the workplace, and pointed to the learning resources available in the library.

**Researcher:** Turning then instead to informal learning and the learning culture of the organisation, are there opportunities for social care employees to feed back their

day to day practice experience?

**Participant O:** (Social Work Development Officer, social care organisation): I don't know whether there are any formal policies in place, but I will draw it back to social work and just separate out the formal social work and practice learning placements. I think shadowing is the only example I can use. There have also been individual projects which people have taken on, the ability to be seconded and move from one setting to another and gain experience in another. Secondment is used quite widely.

**Researcher:** So not as a means of gaining a qualification but just job training?

**Participant O:** It provides a temporary short-term setting. It provides a learning opportunity where you're going to gain additional expertise and knowledge outside your job area or in addition to your job area. Maybe acting temporarily in a post or something that enhances your training and addresses your developmental needs. We have got our own learning resource here, and a library on the fourth floor which carries relatively small stock. But it is certainly well stocked with social work and there is a big practice learning section. So that's an internal resource for staff.

Like UNISON and the OU, the social care organisation learning actors also pointed out the link between formal and informal learning, and again linked this to the level of support offered by management for this process. The above excerpt reveals how the social care organisation was supporting its staff in formal and informal learning through the provision of learning resources. This support for employees, not only with formal learning opportunities but also with continuing learning and gaining new skills in the workplace following qualification, can also be seen in the excerpt from participant P, below.

**Researcher:** Your role is obviously within formal learning through qualifications, but do you see any way in which that formal learning influences the informal?

**Participant P:** (Job Development Manager, social care organisation): I suppose a lot of what we do is formal learning, because we run lots of training programmes with

UNISON. I suppose NVQs could be considered formal *and* informal. I think over the course of doing the job, by actually getting people into formal learning, in my experience people then want to do more and engage at a greater level, so I think it depends on the organisation and the level of support that they give to their staff.

Participant L confirms this link between formal and informal learning, and particularly the value of workplace learning students bringing a critical perspective to the social care organisation. This critical perspective is identified in the SCIE resource, which lists the key characteristics of a social care learning organisation (see page 45) as the organisational culture's characteristics of developing new ideas and methods, an open learning environment allowing learning from mistakes and the opportunity to test out innovative practice. The evidence of the extent to which this critical perspective was allowed to flourish in the case study organisation was not assessed in this research. However, examples of informal learning given by the OU LPR learning actors in the preceding section of this chapter identified instances where this had occurred.

**Researcher:** Were there any other ways in which UNISON may have been involved?

**Participant L:** (Training and Development Officer/Consultant, social care organisation): I think having a student in your team, whether it's somebody who's transferred in there on placement or somebody who has been seconded into a different role. In a well-managed team, having a student will add value because they will bring a new, fresh perspective on work. The old tension about 'is a student a burden or a resource?' – I think that's very much attitudinal. I think in a well-managed team you will see that a student has an interested and critical perspective and those sorts of teams will have learning cultures.

Comparing all of the learning actors' comments identified some key themes, predominantly

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the relationship between formal and informal learning and how they can assist each other. Full management support for staff in both formal and informal learning opportunities is a key issue. Some specific illustrations of how the role of UNISON in the formal LPR has impacted upon informal learning, such as the existence of employees as students and how this benefits the overall learning culture of the organisation, have been depicted to reveal the potential benefits that a learning network such as the LPR can bring to a social care organisation. UNISON has not only ensured the formal learning opportunities of students with few educational qualifications; it has also encouraged line managers to support students' workplace learning.

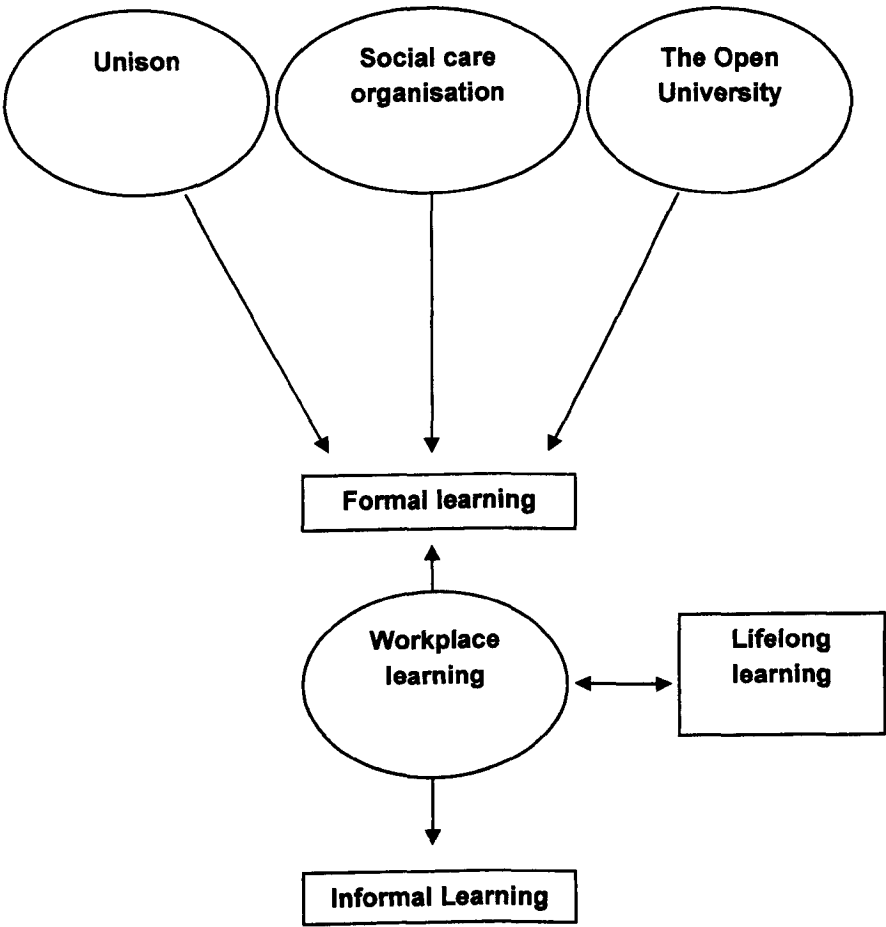
Clear examples have been given of instances where LPR students are informally learning in the workplace as a result of formal learning. For this reason it is important to look again at the literature on formal and informal learning to explore the relationship between these concepts. Stern and Sommerlad (1999) present a continuous learning continuum: this is a step away from merely distinguishing between the concepts of formal and informal learning and attempting to define the boundaries between them, towards an analysis of the relationship between the two. In the continuum a number of learning situations and their degree of formality of informality are presented.

More recently, Colley et al (2002) further explored the relationship between formal and informal learning to suggest that they are not discrete entities, concluding that 'the most significant issue is not the boundaries between these types of learning, but the inter-relationships between dimensions of formality and informality, in particular situations'

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(ibid: p35). The authors list a number of advantages of looking at levels of formality and informality in the workplace. They believe that their approach can allow for investigation into how 'productive balances between the two can be sustained, and how damaging imbalances can be resisted' (ibid). The evidence provided by the case study reveals the inter-relationship between formal and informal learning in the LPR context, and is summarised in Figure 7.1, below.

**Figure 7.1: The interrelationship between formal and informal learning in the LPR context.**



This figure illustrates the relationship between informal and formal learning in the LPR learning network and their relationship to workplace and lifelong learning as identified through the case study. There is not enough evidence, however, to discover how a productive balance between the two may be maintained. This warrants further investigation.

### The role of UNISON in the evaluation of learning

Another role of UNISON in learning was in the evaluation of instances where line managers had taken on the role of practice teacher for employees that they managed. The excerpt from participant F, below, reveals that the interviewee from UNISON who carried out this task believed that learning benefits could be gained through this practice. The evaluation illustrates another key role of UNISON in the learning network as it was also able to act as an evaluator in order to improve aspects of formal and informal learning evaluation throughout the course of the partnership.

There are one or two examples in which the first line manager of a student on the social work course was also their practice teacher. I think that is very good practice, but there were some people who thought that it was bad practice; that a first line manager was not capable of being a practice teacher. I did actually do some evaluation work of that in Brighton and Hove. I did a phone round interview, with students and line managers where the manager had been the practice teacher and I found that there was no problem, and it worked really well and everybody was happy with it. So that's an example of where the first line manager has a very useful role in the learning organisation, if they're allowed to. (Participant F, Consultant, UNISON)

The participant provided the formative evaluation<sup>1</sup> referred to above as documentary evidence for the case study. The evidence for this evaluation was obtained from three students who studied on the LPR Diploma in Social Work programme. These students were all identified as having a line manager who was also their practice teacher, and in all three situations the students remained in their normal work units.

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<sup>1</sup> At its most basic, *formative evaluation* is an assessment of efforts prior to their completion for the purpose of improving the efforts (Scriven 1991).



The conclusions of the formative evaluation were that all the students and both managers felt that the arrangement had many benefits and no major flaws. Advantages listed included the fact that the manager was already aware of the students' strengths and areas requiring development, and was therefore in a position to provide a suitable caseload, allowing for the development of appropriate skills and providing adequate time for reflection.

The only negative aspect of this arrangement was the pressure on managers' time, which impacts on time for supervision sessions, as a result of which they tended to be limited to under an hour. Overall, in this situation the role of line manager as practice teacher appears to have been a positive experience for both the students and the line managers. However, combining the role of practice teacher and line manager is currently not allowed in the OU Social Work degree, although it was allowed for the Diploma in Social Work at the time this evaluation was carried out.

### The Informal Learning Network

From the case study evidence on informal learning discussed in this chapter I have identified an interrelationship between formal and informal learning in the LPR learning network, depicted earlier in Figure 7.1. Here I describe the characteristics of informal learning in the LPR learning network in relation to the types of learning network described by Poell et al (2000). In the *liberal network* the focus is on meeting the needs of the individual, enabling individual employees to create their own learning activities. *Vertical learning networks* are characterised by linear planning of the learning activities. For example, following the linear process already outlined (p117), the development of learning

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policies leads to the planning and execution of learning programmes. The *horizontal learning network* does not provide predesigned learning policies. Learning activities are process-orientated and aimed at problem solving. The *horizontal learning network* exists in an organisation where there are egalitarian relationships between the actors, and the learning climate emphasises the integration of learning. It is difficult to ascertain the nature of the relationships between the learning actors in the case study learning network. Much of the evidence indicates the power and influence of key individuals. There is, however, some evidence of a learning climate that integrates learning and work, but this was reported as dependent upon managers and specific teams in the social care organisation. The *external network*, as the name implies, is coordinated from outside the organisation.

Like the formal learning network, the informal learning network is characterised by the influence of key learning actors, namely UNISON and the OU, which are external to the social care organisation. The role of UNISON was talking with the students and their line managers to discuss and ensure continuing support for their current and future learning needs in the workplace. Again, as in the formal learning network, this reveals an external learning network. It also highlights liberal elements of the network as individual employees appear empowered by their student status in their reflections and actions. There is no specific evidence of a vertical or a horizontal learning network in relation to informal learning. Although the LPR students appeared empowered there was no evidence that the informal learning network was based on egalitarian relationships between the student employees and management.

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The discussions in this chapter have so far focused on the action theories of the LPR learning actors, what they perceive to be informal learning in the LPR and the role that UNISON had and could potentially have had in this process. Key to this, the interrelationship between these two types of learning has been identified. The potential influence of formal learning on the social work students' informal learning at work and in their personal lives has been highlighted, and the case study data have raised a number of questions about this. First, I ask whether a distinction should be made between these two types of learning in a social care organisation, and the benefit of doing so; and second, if these terms are employed to describe learning in the partnership and to further understanding of the role of trade unions in this process, how can they be most appropriately and accurately defined?

As previously acknowledged, the learning network theorists distinguish between formal and informal learning, yet they neglect to make any further distinction along these lines in their account of LNT. Malcolm et al (2003) contemplate the interrelationship between informal and formal learning and the definitions of these terms in the *Journal of Workplace Learning*. They analyse the ways in which these terms have been used in texts and propose an alternative way of analysing learning situations in terms their formality and informality. They apply this analysis to a number of workplace learning contexts and conclude that there are 'significant elements of formal learning in informal situations, and elements of informality in formal situations: the two are inextricably inter-related' (ibid p313). They use the example of learning in the context of secondary school teachers and find that most of the learning processes were informal and had resulted from everyday working practices,

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i.e. teachers changing and improving the ways in which they worked by sharing ideas and approaches. Malcolm et al (ibid) also reflect on how formal learning can impact on informal learning: for example where teachers took ideas from a short formal learning course into their teaching and discussed them with colleagues. A similar example from the case study, discussed earlier in this chapter, was an OU learning actor describing a student, who had taken what he learned as part of the formal tuition on working policy law and reflected on practice in his/her own situation leading to setting up a working party to establish a law on working policy in their own department.

What can be seen from the LPR learning actor's action theories on informal and formal learning is a wide range of activity which for them could constitute informal learning.

Malcolm et al (ibid p317), claim that

All (or almost all) learning situations contain attributes of formality/informality, but the nature of and balance between them varies significantly from situation to situation ... interrelationships and effects can only be understood if learning is examined in relation to the wider contexts in which it takes place.

This paves the way for LNT to help to understand the relationship between the two types of learning, as it incorporates the wider context in which it takes place. Malcolm et al (ibid), however, state early on in their article that it is not possible to define separate ideal types of informal and formal learning, as is certainly also the case in this case study. This does not mean, however, that the terms should be ignored. If Malcolm et al (2003) are correct in stating that all (or almost all) learning situations have attributes of formal and informal learning, then potentially trade unions and higher education institutions could have an

impact on informal learning and thus help to establish effective social care learning organisations.

Despite many years of debate and discussion around the exact definition of what activity constitutes formal and what informal learning in the workplace, the terms are still criticised and rejected. Nonetheless, academics still try to define, apply and look for the relationship between them. Most recently, Heijden et al (2009) explored the possible relationships between formal and informal learning and that of employability. They identify the already-established importance of informal learning in the workplace for maintaining and progressing employees' performance, as researched and discussed by a number of academics including Marsick and Watkins (1990) as discussed in Chapter 2. Heijden et al (2009) use the same definitions of formal and informal learning as those of Marsick and Volpe (1999), which are employed in the analysis of the present case study data. Heijden et al (2009) discuss the factors that can encourage informal learning in the workplace, which is very relevant here and in comparisons with the findings from the LPR case study research.

Heijden et al's (ibid) factors that encourage informal learning in the workplace are employees' interaction with their supervisor; learning the value of their job; and internal and external networks. Two of these factors are significant points of debate for this case study. The role of a supervisor or line manager in the social care organisation has been highlighted and explored both in this chapter and in Chapter 6. In both of these chapters, using LNT as a starting point for the data analysis revealed the significance of an external

network in all areas of the LPRSW qualification. For this reason these two factors which are said to encourage informal learning in the workplace are considered in greater depth below.

Heijden et al (2009) report that a number of theorists have demonstrated a link between the quality of supervision and an employees' learning behaviour in the workplace. As a result of this connection they assume that the supervisor's role in informal learning is positively associated with the employee's employability. This was not tested in the case study; however it is reasonable to speculate that students who receive help and support for learning in the workplace from their line managers will have increased employability. A similar link between individual informal learning and employability could be proposed with regard to the role of UNISON. With reference to the relationship between networks, informal learning and employability, Haijden et al (2009) argue:

New organisational forms imply a broadened span of control and an increased workload for all parties involved, leading to a reduced availability of time and less motivation to provide assistance and support for workers (Russell and Adams 1997). Given these developments, it is of utmost importance to investigate the predictive value of networking in the light of workers employability enhancement, in order to prevent a further ignorance of this factor. (p23)

Here the authors refer to the value of networking within and outside the organisation to help employees to find opportunities to enhance their employability. The case study has shown the value for employees of extending their external network outside the social care organisation. Joining a trade union enabled a higher level of formal and informal learning in their workplace, which in turn presumably increased their employability. So while

Heijden et al (2009) focus only on the value of informal learning to the individual, they do highlight the importance of networks for informal learning and employability.

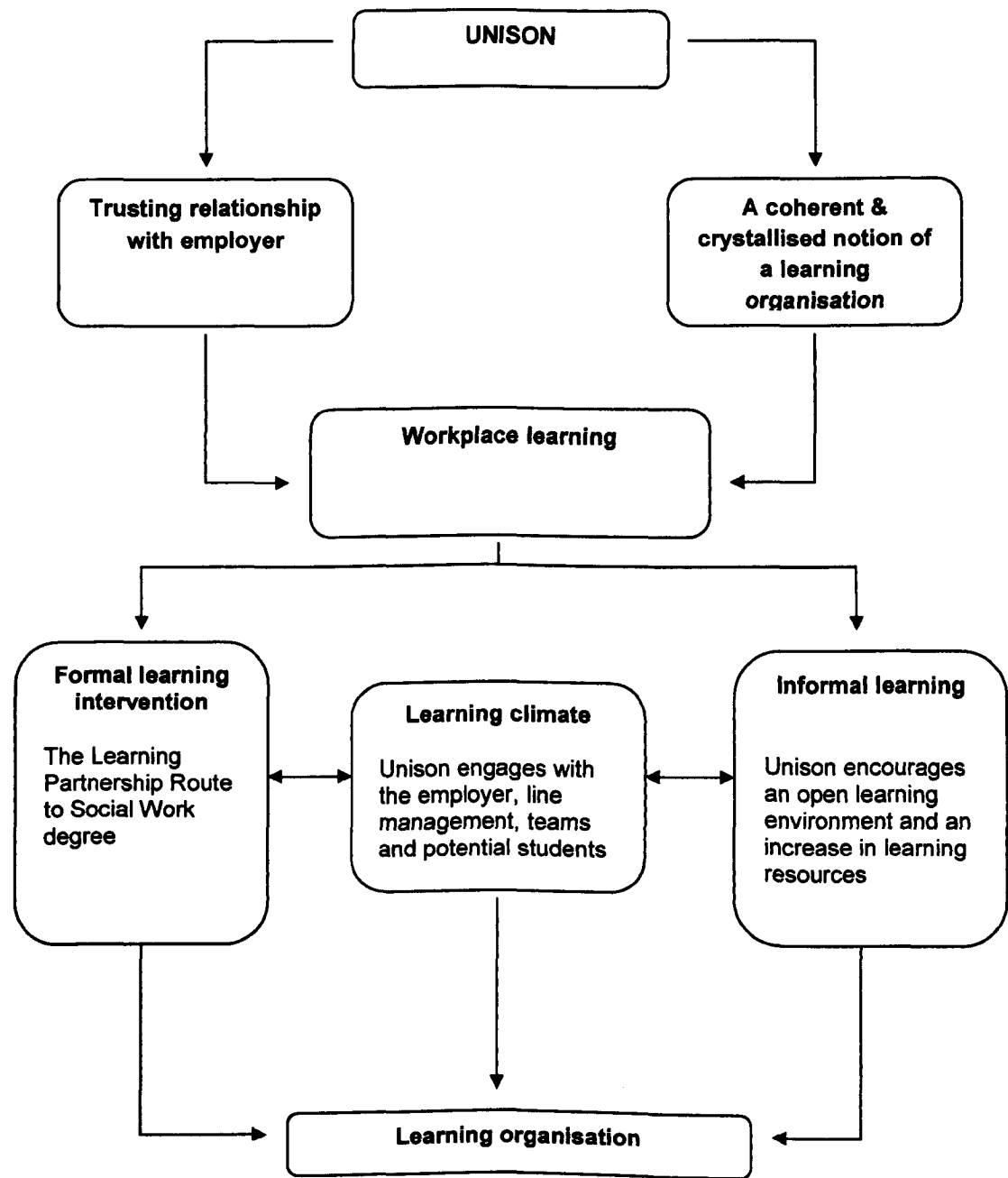
### **UNISON's role in the development of a learning organisation**

The data discussed in this and the previous chapter have provided a useful insight into the role of UNISON in formal and informal workplace learning. Despite the conflict and criticism surrounding the formal and informal learning concepts, making a distinction between them and analysing the data with this in mind has provided a means of exploring the role of UNISON in social care organisational learning. It has also provided examples of where the interaction between formal and informal learning takes place in a social care organisation. In addition to this, based on the learning action theories of the LPR actors, indicators of where this relationship could potentially be developed have been identified.

Based on the evidence presented in Chapters 6 and 7 I have established a link between the UNISON's role in formal and informal learning and in increasing workplace learning in the case study organisation and its becoming a successful learning organisation. This link is revealed in Figure 7.2, below, which depicts how UNISON's relationship of trust with the case study social care employer and a coherent notion of the concept of a learning organisation arguably enabled it to become involved in both formal and informal aspects of workplace learning. UNISON helped to initiate the LPRSW degree, and by engaging with employees at all levels of the organisation was able to encourage an open learning environment and an increase in learning resources. With reference to the social care learning organisation resource (SCIE 2004) outlined in Appendix H, the involvement of

UNISON in formal and informal learning and the learning climate presents features of the social care learning organisation characteristics. I use the term ‘learning climate’ as defined in LNT as an expression of the LPR case study’s learning actors’ learning action theories.

Figure 7.2: UNISON’s role in increasing workplace learning in the case study social care organisation to help it to become a successful learning organisation





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The evidence from the case study outlined in Chapters 5 and 6 can be correlated with the following SCIE (2004) learning organisation characteristics (see Appendix H): in terms of the organisational structure, the LPR was in itself evidence of cross-organisational and collaborative working, and through widening participation in the social work degree to include employees who had not previously studied for higher educational qualification, the case organisation was making best use of these employees' skills, with encouragement from UNISON.

In Chapter 5 I discussed the importance of a clear and distinct notion of a learning organisation to guide workplace learning. For SCIE (2004), an organisational culture based on shared beliefs, values, goals and objectives and an open learning environment are key characteristics of a successful social care learning organisation. The UNISON LPR learning actors expressed a more coherent and crystallised notion of the concept of a learning organisation than the learning actors from the case study social care organisation. UNISON also had a role in engaging with line management to encourage workplace learning opportunities, bringing the concept to the attention of leadership.

This analysis has revealed the role of UNISON in the SCIE (2004) key characteristics and has highlighted where UNISON's input in this learning network case study could be improved. The case study findings highlighted a weakness in UNISON's communications. Several LPR learning actors from the social care organisation and the OU were unclear about UNISON's role in the LPR. For SCIE (2004), another key characteristic of a social care learning organisation is an effective internal and external information communication

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system. In future learning partnerships, UNISON has the potential to ensure effective communication about its own role and the roles of each organisation involved and of specific learning actors.

The research findings provided in this chapter speculate on future possibilities for interaction between formal and informal learning and the role that UNISON could have within this. For example, trade unions and higher education institutions may be in a position to make an impact on informal learning in social care organisations through their role in formal learning.

An additional approach to the analysis of this case study data would be to frame the analysis in terms of the benefits that both the individual learning actors and the organisations they belong to, gain from the partnership. The case study data discussed in this and the previous chapters has already revealed a number of benefits of the LPR to social work qualification. Organisations such as Unison benefit from increased membership recruitment whilst individual social care employees, who had not previously studied in higher education, benefit from widening participation to the social work qualification.

In my analysis of the formal and informal learning action theories the student perspective of the LPR is not taken into account. The findings presented below from the preliminary research study address this omission. This preliminary research included 16 telephone interviews; 7 with students studying on the OU LPRSW and 9 with students studying on

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the traditional route to social work degree with the Open University (see appendix I for student interview schedule). These findings are presented by theme below:

All students indicated that they had received support from their employer. The types of support listed by both the LPR and non LPR students included support from their employer during the application process and a travel allowance. The LPR students additionally listed a book allowance and employer input at stakeholder meetings:

The stakeholder meetings happen twice a year. Here they look at the needs of students and renegotiate a number of things such as study leave etc. (Student 2)

The non LPR students also listed the support they received from their training department and managers.

Over half of both samples of students were found to be dissatisfied with the amount of support they had received from their employer. Comments made indicate why the students felt this way:

We were not given as much support as I would have liked. I must confess that when I applied for this I really did expect that there'd be more support from our human resource department, but basically there's nothing. I just expected there to be perhaps a library resource or information centre. (Student 11)

I don't think the employer has been very supportive, the opposite in fact because my manager was doing the same qualification. (Student 6)

All of the non LPR students and five of the LPR students indicated that they had received direct support from the Open University. The types of support received from the Open

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University included support during the application process, student services, online support, IT/ technical support and also support from a regional coordinator. A similar proportion of the students from each sample were found to be satisfied with the support they had received (LPR 57%, non LPR 56%).

All students indicated that they had received support from their course tutor. The types of support received by students in both samples was named as email correspondence, assessment feedback and teaching. Over half of the non LPR students expressed satisfaction with the support they had received from their course tutors:

The course tutor has been really good. (Student 12)

None of the LPR students expressed full satisfaction with support they had received from their programme tutors. Five of the LPR students indicated that they were dissatisfied with the support they had received from their course tutors. Comments made included:

I think they're inadequate actually in terms of teaching ability. (Student 2)

The remaining two LPR students indicated a mixed level of satisfaction with support provided by the course tutors. A high proportion of the non LPR student (7 students 78%) indicated that they were satisfied with the support provided by their programme tutor.

A high proportion of both the LPR and non LPR students named their peers as a source of support which they drew on during the course (5 LPR 63% and 8 non LPR 80%).

Comments made included:

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‘That’s been the most important thing really. I think the other students have been really supportive and that’s what gets you through’. (Student 9)

We’re a little core that have been through lots together and that has been really positive. (Student 1)

The following aspects of the programme were named by both LPR and non LPR students as being the most successful:

-A well planned/ organised programme (2 LPR, 4 non LPR students)

I think it is good because everything that you need is there and you don’t have to go and search out the books and things. (Student 13)

-A work based qualification (4 LPR, 4 non LPR students)

The fact that you’ve got the opportunity to work and study at the same time makes you a much more rounded practitioner. (Student 8)

I’m very shocked to find that actually a lot of people are coming into social work with no social care background whatsoever. They’re doing two placements and then going out to work as a social worker. I think this [work based degree qualification] is a much better because even if somebody’s coming in with no experience they’re getting all of that experience over three years. (Student 6)

-The course material (2 LPR, 5 non LPR students)

I do feel that the books and everything the OU provide with the courses are very well written, very easy to understand. (Student 11)

The LPR students additionally listed the strengths of having bridging workshops (2 students) and the financial advantages of working whilst studying (1 student).

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The difficulty in combining work and study is named by both LPR and non LPR students as being the least successful aspect of the social work programme which they were following. The LPR students also listed the timing of deadlines (1 student) and the heavy workload on placement (1 student) as the least successful aspects of the programme. The non LPR students also listed the teething problems with the new degree (3 students) and lack of support from their employer as the least successful aspects of the degree programme.

Two LPR and two non LPR students suggested that reducing their workload would improve the programme. The LPR students also suggested rearranging deadline timings (1 student), informing colleagues of the programme requirements (2 students) and improving the teaching quality (1 student). One of the LPR students suggested that they didn't feel any improvements to the programme were necessary.

No I don't think so it's pretty well planned out. I think with the stakeholders meeting they are trying to tailor the course to the needs of the students and organisation. I think it's a good way of working. (Student 6)

The non LPR students suggested improving the explanation given with the records of practice (2 students), separating the IT components into one course (4 students), increasing the number of study days (1 student) and increasing the contact with their programme tutor (1 student) as steps that could be taken to improve their learning experience.

All nine non LPR students indicated that they would recommend the social work programme to another employee. In contrast, only one of the seven LPR students indicated

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that they would recommend the programme, four of the LPR students indicated that they would not recommend the programme and another appeared unsure.

The majority of the LPR and non LPR student did not express any concerns about completing the programme (6 LPR students' 86% and 8 non LPR students 89%). The students were asked whether they felt their placements had met the variety and quality of experience to meet their learning needs. All nine of the non LPR students and six of the seven students LPR students expressed that the placements had meet this criteria.

The students were asked whether they felt work based learning was the most effective route to social work qualification. Four of the seven LPR students (57%) and seven of the nine non LPR students (78%) indicated that they felt work based learning to be the most effective route. Two of the LPR students and only one of the non LPR students indicated that they felt that work based learning was not the most effective route to social work qualification.

I think it's a really difficult route to social work, bearing in mind that there is another alternative that's being introduced on within this organisation. People are being seconded to the local university for the master's qualification. It's probably a more manageable course. (Student 3)

I think it would be better if people got time out of work and just studied for a while and then went back to work. Social work is such a stressful job and with a high staff turnover it can out you off before you even started. (Student 12)

## Chapter 7: The Interaction between formal and informal learning

All seven LPR students and eight of the nine non LPR students indicated that they had a two year tie post qualification to work for their sponsoring employer. One LPR student indicated that they in fact had a three year tie in. Six of the seven LPR students and five of the nine non LPR students indicated that they were happy with this post qualification tie. The other students (1 LPR and 3 non LPR students) indicated that they were unsure as to whether they were happy with this tie.

Whilst five of the nine non LPR students indicated their desire to leave their employer at the end of the contractual tie, none of the LPR students indicated definite intentions to leave. Only one non LPR student expressed an explicit intention to stay with their sponsoring employer post qualification.

The preliminary study revealed few differences between the experiences of the LPR and non LPR students studying for the social work degree. The key benefit to the LPRSW students identified from these findings is the widening of participation of the social work degree qualification to these work based students through the OU programme. Additional benefits of the programme for both sets of students interviewed included what they described as the most successful aspects, namely that the qualification is work based allowing them to gain a qualification without having to take time out from work. The well written course material and well planned degree programme were also highlighted as being some of the most successful aspects of the programme run by the OU. The LPR students additionally listed the bridging workshops (a learning experience which the non-LPR students did not receive) as strength of their experience as a student. Both sets of students



## Chapter 7: The Interaction between formal and informal learning

expressed dissatisfaction with the amount of support they had received from their employer. However when asked if they intended to stay with their sponsoring employer following completion of the qualification, no LPR student indicated that they had an intention of leaving, whilst some of the non LPR students stated a clear intention to leave following fulfilment of their contractual tie.

Overall these findings reveal few differences between the levels of satisfaction felt by students experiencing either route to the social work qualification being offered by the OU. It can be noted, however, that it was the explicit intention of a number of non LPR students to leave their employer post qualification. The responses from the LPR students suggested that they were happier with their employer, possibly as a result of studying on the enhanced LPR route, although this is not a conclusion that can be verified with this data.

What is also clear from this presentation of the findings from the preliminary study with students is that the diverse positions of the respondents within the LPR learning network, clearly gave them different perspectives on the LPRSW. For example the LPR student's satisfaction with their experience was not found to differ substantially from those students studying on the traditional route to social work qualification. These students had not received the perceived added benefits outlined by the LPR learning actors from UNISON and the OU, such as the book allowance and bridging workshops.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter has explored the interaction between formal and informal learning in the LPR learning network. This analysis is important, as clearly learning in the LPR learning network was not limited to formal learning. The evidence from the case study's learning actors was outlined and discussed in relation to their feedback on informal learning in the LPR to address research objectives 2(c) and 3. The LPR learning action theories on informal learning were described and discussed, and from this the LPR informal learning network emerged. Some relationships between social work students' formal learning and informal learning in the workplace were identified and discussed. The evidence from Chapters 6 and 7 was then combined to consider the exact nature of UNISON's role in workplace learning and its link to the creation of a successful learning organisation. Further limitations of LNT were revealed. In the next chapter these limitations, alongside those identified earlier in Chapters 5 and 6, are described and examined. Following this a number of modifications to LNT are proposed.

## 8. Enhancing Learning Network Theory

In this chapter the analysis in Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 are drawn together to consider the benefits and limitations of LNT and some substantial modifications to the theory are outlined.

Following this some alternatives to the theory are considered which enhance the interpretation of the case study data.

The criticisms, described in the previous chapters that emerged from the analysis of the case study data need to be factored into the LPR learning network. Firstly, with reference to the discussions in Chapter 5 about the nature of the learning network as an interpretative framework, the position of learning actors in the learning network was a key point raised early in the analysis. Poell et al (2000) postulate that:

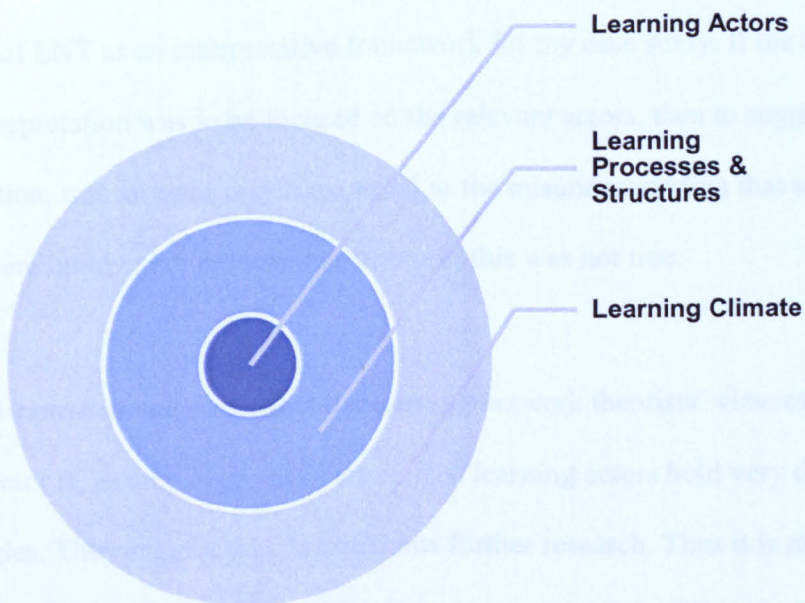
...at the heart of each learning network are the learning actors, that is, those engaged in organizing learning...They are referred to as learning actors, because they are regarded as stakeholders who act deliberately on the basis of their own theories and interests with respect to work-related learning. (p33)

However, as shown in Figure 5.1 (p117), which details the LNT, actors are not positioned at the heart of the network. A new model should incorporate the criticism outlined earlier in terms of what was learnt about the flow between the three components to reposition the learning actors at the heart of the network.

Figure 8.1, below, is a reworked model of the learning network expressing the components in light of reflections made following its application to the LPR case study. This revised figure repositions the learning actors at the heart of the learning network. In Poell et al's (2000) original learning network the flow between components travels from the learning structures to

the learning actors, then to the learning processes and back to the learning structures. The new figure imposes no such restrictions, allowing for a variety of interactions between components. Here the learning climate, represented by the outer circle, is repositioned outside the learning structures, encapsulating all the other learning components.

**Figure 8.1: The learning network of an organisation (adapted from Poell et al 2000)**



Below I take each component of the network and reflect on how it is used as an interpretative framework for analysis of the case study data, and then consider the strengths and limitations of the theory in greater detail. This leads to a description of the modifications needed to make LNT applicable to the social care context, first to discover the value of the theory for understanding how UNISON can help to establish and support organisational learning in

social care organizations, and second to achieve the social care organisation's target of becoming a successful learning organisation with a predominant learning culture.

### **Learning Network Theory: Conceptual Problems with Learning Actors**

A key point arising from the application of the interpretative framework of LNT to the LPR is Poell et al's (2000) wide definition of what they term the learning actor in the learning network. They give examples of relevant learning actors which include not only individuals but also whole organisations. This definition of a learning actor presented problems in the application of LNT as an interpretative framework for my case study. If the LPR learning network interpretation was to be focused on the relevant actors, then to suggest that UNISON, an organisation, was an actor may have led to the misunderstanding that all individuals at UNISON were involved in the learning network; this was not true.

Another criticism that can be directed at the learning network theorists' view of what constitutes a learning actor is, as they themselves argue, that learning actors hold very diverse learning action theories. They suggest that this warrants further research. Thus it is more appropriate to define learning actors as individuals. This is important, given the diversity of learning action theories, as became evident from the individual learning actors in the LPR case study, even where they belonged to the same organisation. A good example is provided in the application of the learning network theory in Chapter 5, where learning actors from the social care organisation provided conflicting action theories in relation to their concepts of a learning organisation. For example, when asked what s/he understood a learning organisation to be, Participant O (below) described aspects of practice learning and its benefits:

So they are still in practice, but they're still then offering their expertise. Not just one on one, but in a much more structured way, to be able to give and pass onto the next generation of social work students. So it begins to embed a sort of notion of what I see as a learning organisation that is using our learning. (Participant O, Social Work Development Officer, social care organisation)

In contrast, Participant Q provided a different notion of what enables social care organisations to become learning organisations, speaking at length about the role of knowledge management to ensure effective communication:

I am a huge advocate of any organisation becoming a learning organisation...my own observation is that organisations are very poor at thinking about their knowledge management in terms of what happens when individuals move on and things change. There isn't a framework for that sort of succession planning...what happens is there is a total loss of key knowledge...there were too many changes in key management to take seriously the notion of a learning organisation. (Participant Q, Head of Learning and Development, social care organisation)

### **Learning Network Theory: Conceptual Problems with Learning Processes**

In Chapter 4 the learning processes of the LPR learning network were identified in line with the components of LNT. The interpretative analysis revealed another crucial problem with LNT, as described by Poell et al (2000) and illustrated in Figure 5.1 (page 117). Earlier in this chapter an alternative figure describing the learning network of an organisation was proposed (see Figure 8.1). Evidence from the learning processes of the LPR learning network supports an alternative flow between the components.

The illustration provided by the learning networks theorists (Figure 5.1, p117) appears to suggest that the flow from learning processes to learning structures occurs more directly than that between the learning structures to the learning processes. In figure 3 the learning actors and their action theories are shown to exert an influence between the flow of learning structures such as the learning climate to the learning processes; but they do not have any influence between the flow from learning processes back to structures. This suggests that the learning processes of an organisation directly impact upon its learning structure without input from the learning actors. Clearly, as detailed in Chapter 5, the learning actors applied the learning climate values about widening participation to the organisation's learning policies. After making the decision to run the LPRSW qualification they then had a role in planning the learning activities (part of the content structure) and dividing the tasks and responsibilities of the actors involved in the LPR (the organisational structure).

### **Learning Network Theory: Conceptual Problems with Learning Action Theories and the Learning Climate**

The application of the interpretative framework provided evidence of and insight into a strong relationship between the LPR learning actors' learning theories and the learning climate of the LPR learning network. Poell and Krogt (2006) define learning action theories as the learning actor's views on learning activities and the organisation of learning programs. This can be contrasted with the learning climate – part of the learning structure of the network – which is defined as the norms and values about learning that are enclosed within the structure of a learning network.

In applying LNT to the case study data I analysed individual learning actors' views to try to uncover the learning action theories and identify the learning climate. I looked at overarching norms and values on learning in the social care organisation which could have arisen from individual action theories or from the political and academic context in which the social care organisation exists, for example the influences of social care governing institutions such as the Social Care Institute of Excellence (SCIE) and the General Social Care Council (GSCC).

This analysis appeared to fit neatly with the learning network components as described by the learning network theorists (Krogt 1995, Poell et al 2000). However, in Chapter 6's analysis of the role of UNISON in formal learning activities in the LPR something different to a learning action theory or the learning climate, as defined by the Poell and Krogt, emerged. The research and analysis revealed the importance of trust in the learning network. The findings from this case study and the identified role of UNISON in gaining the trust of employers and employees to implement a formal learning program in the social care organisation highlight the link between interpersonal trust, the learning culture and organisational commitment. Interpersonal trust is a key factor here. It was the role of key UNISON representatives in building trust through interpersonal relationships that enabled trust at an individual level and commitment to learning at the organisational level.

Interpersonal trust does not fit into the interpretative framework, as trust between key learning actors involved in the network may not stem from learning activities. Poell and Moorsel (1996) argue that individual action theories relating to learning activities and values and norms regarding learning produce the learning climate of the organisation. This led to a problem in interpreting the case study data: if the interpretation is restricted to the components of LNT



then many important factors that are part of a learning network but do not fit into these prescribed components may be overlooked.

Hardin (2002) examines the concept of trust and argues that there is wide disagreement over what trust really is, despite the attention of a considerable number of philosophers. He argues: 'For the understanding of trust relationships, however, it is fundamentally important to keep real-world complications in view because they are the stuff of relationships' (p, xxi). Here, and key to the LPR learning network case study analysis, is attention to trust relationships. UNISON built trust through relationships at both the individual and the organisational level. Hardin (2002) considers the encapsulated interest model of trust in great detail. In this model the notion of a trust relationship relies on the proposition: 'I trust you because your interest encapsulates mine...in addition, the richer an ongoing relationship and the more valuable it is to us, the more trusting we are likely to be in that relationship' (p3). One element of the encapsulated trust model outlined by Hardin (2002) which is important in the critique of Learning Network Theory is that 'trust is a cognitive notion' (p7).

If I subscribe to this encapsulated model of trust relationships, a deep criticism of LNT is unearthed. The LPR learning network was found to be established on trust relationships between learning network actors. Poell and Krogt (2006: p71) argue that learning and development are processes which occur 'less systematically and less consciously than assumed'. Their LNT was put forward as a frame of reference to describe and explain how work-related learning projects are organized and focuses on behavior rather than cognition. The LPR learning network, however, has been shown to be based on relationships of trust, and if trust is a cognitive notion how can cognition be so easily disregarded?

Understanding the trust relationships in the LPR through the application of the encapsulated model leads to the argument that UNISON, the OU and the social care organisation built trust in one another based upon common interests which included widening participation in social work qualifications and improving workplace learning. However, the encapsulated interests do not account for how trust develops in circumstances where individuals in a relationship hold both common and uncommon goals at the same time. The LPR learning actors had their own personal and employing organisational interests alongside their common interests.

The organization, either as a whole or as individuals, may have had a firm belief in the reliability, truth, ability or strength of the role of UNISON in the LPR. Trust for UNISON at the individual learning actor level of the learning network appears to have led to trust at an organisational level, as UNISON was able to expand its role in the social care organisation beyond its more traditional scope to take on a role in the workplace learning. This flow between learning actor and learning climate represents a different flow between the learning network components to that described by Poell (2006) and Krogt (1995).

## **The Learning Structures**

The learning network theorists were not referring to mental operations by concepts such as the learning processes and strategies; these are rather seen as socio-organisational. Poell et al (2000) state:

The learning network theory...focuses on what happens between people as they interact socially, rather than on what takes place within a person's mind. (p34)

For Poell et al (2000), LNT centres on behaviour rather than cognition. One distinct problem uncovered through the use of LNT is that there appears to be a great leap between the three elements of the interpretative frame and identifying theoretical types of learning network. Following the description and outline of some of the structures, action theories and processes of the case study, one could expect that uncovering the underlying theoretical type of learning network would be straightforward. However, as shown later in this chapter and in Chapters 5 to 7, interpreting the type of learning network that the case study represented relied more heavily on analysis of the very mental operations that the learning network theorists argue are unnecessary.

The purpose of conducting interviews was considered in depth in the methodology chapter and is defined by Patton (1990) as being ‘to find out what is on someone’s mind....We interview people to find out from them those things which we cannot directly observe’. This provides a good explanation for one of the main reasons that interviews were employed as the key research method. The use of interviews as a research method, however, conflicts with the fundamental principles of LNT. An alternative research method which would have fit in with LNT would have been observation. Using this research method the learning processes in the social care organisation could have been identified. However, observation would only have explored and evidenced the current informal and formal learning in the organisation and it would not have been possible to identify UNISON’s role of in planning, implementing and evaluating the social work programmes. Do the learning network theorists rely on continuous observation of a learning network from start to finish in order to collect the necessary data? This would make the interpretative framework impractical and extremely challenging for researchers.

An additional criticism of LNT is that Poell et al (2000) argue that learning structures can be observed in the content and organisational structures and also the learning climate. The learning climate, however, is defined as the norms and values regarding learning enclosed within the structure of a learning network. Is it enough to just observe norms and values regarding learning? In a typology of norms Morris (1956) postulates that:

...values are individual or commonly shared conceptions of the desirable, i.e. what I and/or others feel we justifiably want – what is felt proper to want. On the other hand, norms are generally accepted, sanctioned prescriptions for or prohibitions against, others' behaviour, belief or feeling...Values can be held by a single individual; norms cannot. (p610)

If values can be held by a single individual, then surely Poell et al (2000) are missing significant data in a learning network by focusing only 'on what happens between people as they interact socially, rather than on what happens within a person's mind' (p34).

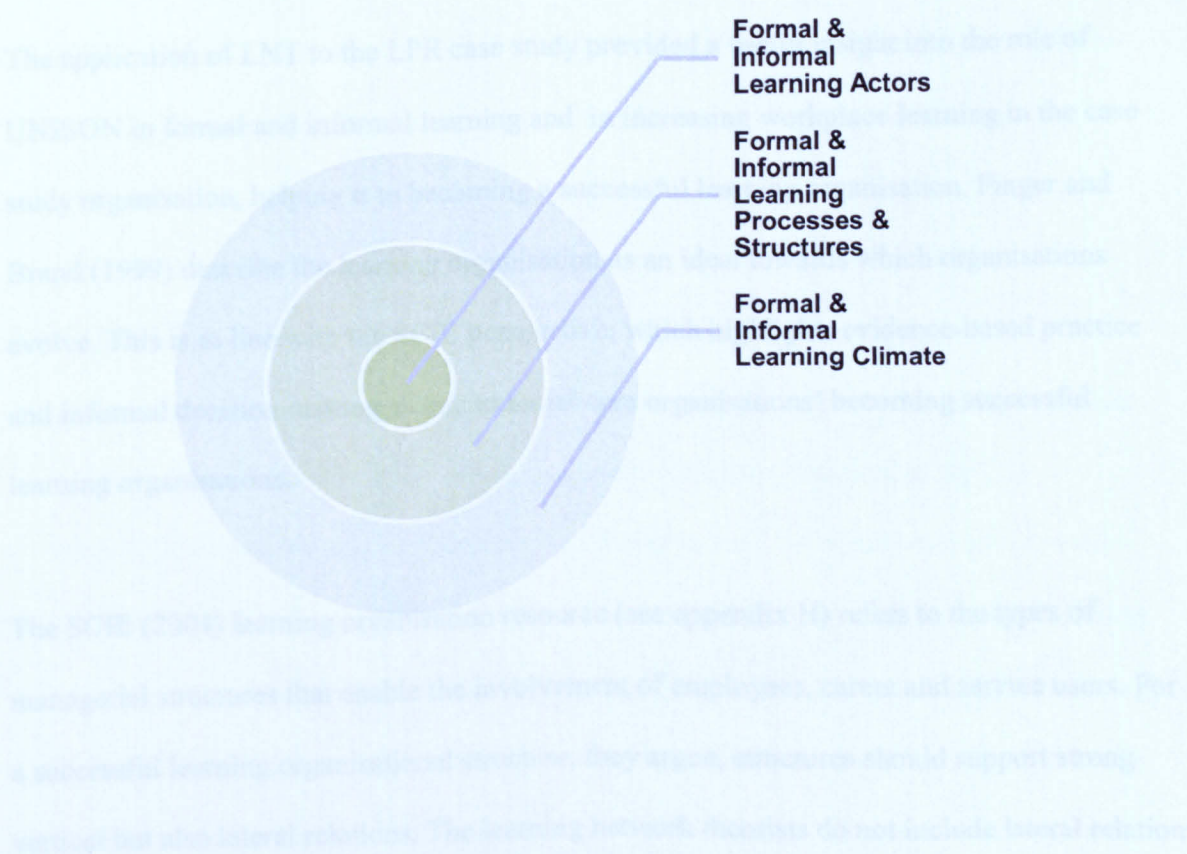
### **Learning Network Theory: Conceptual Problems with Formative and Informative Learning**

Reflecting on the evidence that emerged on applying LNT to the case study has revealed a number of limitations and strengths of the LNT model of workplace learning. One key point identified is that despite reference to a distinction between informal and formal learning, the differences between the two are not incorporated in the framework. The components – the actors, action theories, processes and structure – all enable an analysis of formal learning, which, as defined by many academics, is learning that is preplanned and structured. The LNT does not easily lend itself to the analysis of informal learning in the workplace, as many of the

processes in the learning network are defined as the development of learning policies and learning programmes, excluding unplanned and ad hoc learning activities.

The application of LNT to the LPR case study enabled an investigation of workplace learning in the social care organisation through an analysis of formal and informal learning. Formal and informal learning in this network are illustrated through the further development of LNT to incorporate both a formal and informal learning network, as illustrated in Figure 8.2, below. This figure represents how these concepts could be incorporated into LNT based on evidence from the LPR case study.

**Figure 8.2: Formal and informal learning in the learning network of an organisation (adapted from Poell et al 2000)**



### **Theoretical Types of Learning Network**

Following analysis of the main components of the case study learning network in Chapter 5, it was reasonable to assume that the case study learning network could now be classified by type. The findings from the case study data analysis were compared to the four learning networks depicted by Poell et al (2000) (see Chapter 5). It would appear from the application of the LNT interpretative framework that the learning partnership case study predominantly comprises characteristics which fall into the horizontal and external learning network categories. However, this analysis did not clarify which type of learning network would be most beneficial for the social care organisation to work towards. As acknowledged by Poell et al (2000), it should not be assumed that an organisation will neatly fit into one of the four types of learning network.

The application of LNT to the LPR case study provided a useful insight into the role of UNISON in formal and informal learning and in increasing workplace learning in the case study organisation, helping it to becoming a successful learning organisation. Finger and Brand (1999) describe the learning organisation as an ideal towards which organisations evolve. This is in line with the SCIE perspective, which highlights evidence-based practice and informal decision making as key to social care organisations' becoming successful learning organisations.

The SCIE (2004) learning organisation resource (see appendix H) refers to the types of managerial structures that enable the involvement of employees, carers and service users. For a successful learning organisational structure, they argue, structures should support strong vertical but also lateral relations. The learning network theorists do not include lateral relations

in their four types of learning network, yet the importance of these is stressed in the management literature (see Meer-Kooistra and Scapens 2008). The LNT could be adapted to incorporate lateral structures, which exist where there is a minimal structure and where relationships are formed primarily around cooperation and coordination, in contrast to command and control (Meer-Kooistra and Scapens 2008).

The evidence provided by the case study analysis has revealed the role of LNT in the description of learning in an organisation, and the actors, processes and structures which this involves. Uncovering the theoretical type of learning network in the case study extended the theory further than simply describing the data. The learning network arguably allows for analysis, through the four theoretical types, of the key criteria that make up a learning organisation. Further research is needed to explore what type of learning network would be most beneficial for social care and other types of organisation. I hypothesise that different types of learning networks benefit or limit different types of learning, for example formal and informal learning.

### **Alternatives to LNT**

It is evident from the application of LNT to the case study data that the learning partnership does possess all the elements of a learning network. Following analysis using this interpretative framework, the structures, actors and processes involved have been identified and explored. LNT has also enabled some analysis and classification of the type of learning network that the partnership illustrates. In applying LNT as an interpretative framework in this chapter I did not strive to reach a conclusion or present a full picture of learning in the case study organisation. I have provided evidence and an illustration of one way in which LNT can

be applied to a real-life contemporary case study. In so doing, the action theories of the interview participants relating directly to the concept of a learning organisation have been uncovered and linked to the structure and process components.

Any attempt at measurement or evaluation comes to a standstill here, even after a detailed account of the components of the network. This limitation to LNT is acknowledged by the theorists themselves, who identify the theory as a descriptive and interpretative model of how learning can be organised rather than a prescription for how it should be organised. This is one of the key differences between LNT and alternative theories, and the former appears to provide little more than a process outline to those who employ it.

One alternative to employing the interpretative framework of LNT to the case study data would have been to use the restrictive versus expansive continuum outlined by Fuller and Unwin (2003) and further developed by Evans et al (2006) (see Appendix A). This continuum is prescriptive in that it outlines the characteristics of restrictive and expansive learning environments. Rainbird et al (2009) have applied the continuum to care work learning environments in an attempt to assess institutional and organisational capacity for skill development in social care. Through an analysis of institutional frameworks and thirteen case studies they propose an expansive/restrictive continuum of learning environments in care work (see Figure 8.3 below).



**Figure 8.3: The expansive/restrictive continuum of learning environments in care work**

<b>Expansive</b>	<b>Restrictive</b>
Whole organisation approach	Reactive, compliance driven approach
Training, development & assessment incorporated into organisational practice	Training, development & assessment bolted on
Internal capacity for assessment and training	Organisational relies on external expertise
Moral/ideological commitment to improvement & maximising staff potential	Lack of commitment to staff development
Employee-driven learning	Employees see themselves as 'just a care worker'
Trust in competent employees	Staff treated as unskilled workers with little autonomy
Source: Rainbird et al, 2009	

Comparing the results of the application of the LPR case study with the characteristics of the continuum, several points can be made. First, this continuum indicates that reliance on external expertise represents a restrictive learning environment. The planning and execution of the LPR in the case study organisation relied on external expertise from UNISON and the OU. While the terms 'expansive' and 'restrictive', as used in the continuum, could be seen as representative of good and bad learning environments, respectively, Unwin (2004: p6), outlines that 'It is important to stress that the model should be seen as a continuum and not as a rigid polarisation of 'good' (expansive) and 'bad' (restrictive) practice. There will be occasions when, for various reasons, organisations have to move more towards the restrictive end of the continuum'.

The second point is that trust in competent employees is identified as necessary in the expansive/restrictive continuum for an expansive learning environment. The results of the LPR learning network case study support this key role of trust. The importance of trust in

establishing the LPRSW qualification was identified and discussed in Chapter 6. Trust in an expansive learning environment needs to be extended here to include employees outside the organisation.

The expansive/restrictive continuum is for application to specific workplaces and learning environments in one organisation and does not easily lend itself to analysis of a partnership learning network involving more than one organisation. It may be possible for each organisation's learning environment to be placed along the continuum; however, the case study data do not provide enough detailed evidence to address each of the features of the learning environment outlined. With further research it would be possible to explore which of the continuums features are or are not present in the social care organisation and to highlight the expansive and restrictive areas of this learning environment. Perhaps what would be most useful to the field of workplace learning, which involves the exploration of learning partnerships, is a continuum that encompasses more than a singular learning environment and can assess a learning network such as the learning partnership investigated in this thesis.

Despite these criticisms of LNT, which were made after reflecting on the relationships between the components of the LPR learning network, the theory proved a useful tool for interpreting the case study data. In Chapter 2, the literature review, a number of different approaches to learning organisations and workplace learning were identified. Many of these approaches have predominantly been applied to organisations in the private sector to provide detailed accounts of what constitute forms of organisational learning, learning organisations, workplace learning and a learning climate. Examples of this are the emergence of the concept of organisational learning in 1978 (Argyris) and the seminal work completed by Senge in the

1990s on the learning organisation. More recently, Ortenblad (2007) concluded his writings on the learning organisation by suggesting that there are as many as thirty different adaptations of the learning organisation. The literature review looked at the concepts of the learning organisation and organisational learning and the abundance of interpretations led to investigation of the more current research into learning in the workplace and more detailed contributions focusing on formal and informal learning. This provided a direction for how best to analyse the LPR case study data.

Applying LNT as an interpretative framework has enabled an analysis in which the nature of learning activities and the roles of the learning actors involved was not predetermined. This allowed the unique role of UNISON in this social care case study to be identified and described at length. Other models of workplace learning also prescribe the best environment in which learning can take place in an organisation and the types of learning activity and organisational characteristics that meet these aims. From the outset, the research objectives were about exploring concepts of learning in social care from the point of view of the actors involved in the LPR. The learning network provided a satisfactory basis from which this investigation could begin.

**Chapter Summary**

In this chapter the analysis in Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 were drawn together and the benefits and limitations of LNT reflected upon. Conceptual problems with the learning processes, learning action theories and learning structures and with the theoretical types of learning network were outlined. A modified figure was proposed to enhance LNT, based on evidence from the LPR case study, which expresses the components in light of its application to the LPR case study. This revised figure repositions the learning actors at the heart of the learning network. In contrast to the learning network proposed by Poell et al (2000), the flow between components is not restricted. In the original learning network the flow between components travels from the learning structures to the learning actors, then to the learning processes and back to the learning structures. The new figure places no restrictions on the direction of flow, allowing for a variety of interactions between components. Following this, an alternative theory, the expansive- restrictive framework (Fuller and Unwin 2003) was considered as an alternative to the application of LNT.

## 9. Conclusions

This thesis begins by examining the general context for trade unions as participants within learning organisations. This was a backdrop to featuring UNISON as an actor within a learning organisation, operating in the field of social care. A review of the current literature pertaining to work based learning uncovered a need to further explore the role of trade unions in work based learning partnerships with social care organisations. Whilst a number of authors have detailed the role of trade unions in work based learning partnerships with public sector organisations, including social care (for example Sutherland and Rainbird 2000), there is a shortage of academic literature relating specifically to their role in informal learning in these organisations.

The thesis has examined through a case study methodology – the Learning Partnership Route (LPR) within the Open University Social Work Degree – that required both UNISON and employer participation in supporting the study of employees. I asked specific questions at the outset based on gaps in the existing literature and the case study presented here has illuminated some possible answers.

I aimed to investigate the nature of workplace learning and the nature of learning in the organisation in the following ways. That is;

1. Identify and explore the concept of a learning organisation from the viewpoint of the actors involved in the LPR using the SCIE learning organisation resource (2004).
2. Investigate the role of UNISON in workplace learning through the LPRSW degree:
  - a. explore ways in which UNISON can support and help to implement a learning organisation and culture in social work organisations;

- b. investigate the role of UNISON in formal learning through the LPRSW degree;
  - c. investigate the role of UNISON in informal learning through the LPRSW degree;
3. Contribute to and increase understanding of social care workplace learning theory and research methods.

The main focus of this thesis is the nature of workplace learning in social care and the role of one trade union in a learning partnership with a social care organisation and the Open University. This is achieved through the development of Learning Network Theory. The literature review provided a background to the empirical research presented. The learning opportunities studied through this partnership case study call for a complex integration of academic literature from a number of areas including current and historic industrial relations in the United Kingdom, widening participation, the emergence of literature pertaining to the concept of the learning organisation and workplace learning, in particular informal and formal learning. In addition to this literature, the work of Poell et al (2000) on the Learning Network Theory was critically analysed before being used to further understand the dynamics of the case study partnership in question. The current political perspective on skills and learning were firstly addressed and the role of trade unions is then discussed in relation to learning opportunities and the Learning Partnership Route (LPR) case study. Literature on the concepts of the 'learning organisation' and 'organisational learning', workplace learning and the Learning Network Theory were then outlined and reviewed.

Chapter three described and examined the methodological choices which have been made to address the research aims and objectives outlined in the introduction. The philosophical basis of the methodology employed being critical realism, was outlined. Following this the case study research method, units of data analysis, sources of evidence, measures, sampling strategies, participants and ethical implications were defined and justified. Lastly consideration was given to the data analysis.

In chapter four the context surrounding the Learning Partnership Route initiative is described and analysed in greater depth. The first part of this chapter explored the development of trade union involvement in workplace learning, through an analysis of the educational and political context, leading to the introduction of the Learning Partnership Route (LPR). The case study social care context was then looked at in greater detail to support an understanding of the LPR implementation and to increase in understanding of why the initiative was taken forward. This is achieved through an insight of the employer's approach to training and development and the impact of the wider regulatory framework on the organisation. Lastly, drawing on evidence from the case study research, details are provided about when the partnership with the employer was first set up and how this initiative built on the trust that was established through earlier programmes delivered through the partnership.

A number of approaches and theories pertaining to learning in organisations were identified in the literature review. The first part of chapter five explored LNT in greater detail to support and increase understanding of the theory in the data analysis/ discussion chapters. In the second part of chapter five the theory was then applied to the Learning Partnership Route (LPR) in order to describe the actors, processes and structure of this learning partnership.

Evidence was incorporated from both the interview data and the documentary evidence gathered during the case study research. In the final part of this chapter the type of learning network which the LPR case study constitutes was examined. The application of the Learning Network Theory and interpretative framework to the case study data uncovered the learning actors' actions theories relating to the learning organisation and the SCIE characteristics. In doing so a number of problems with the Learning Network Theory were identified and these are elaborated upon in chapter eight of this thesis.

The focus chapter six was solely on the formal learning aspects of the Learning Partnership Route (LPR) learning network and in particular the role that UNISON has had in this process, in order to address the research objective 2b: to investigate the role of UNISON in formal learning through the learning partnership route to social work degree. A number of themes were identified relating to the role of UNISON in formal learning in the learning partnership network: the function of UNISON in the partnership, the strengths of UNISON's involvement in formal learning, the weaknesses or problems resulting from UNISON's involvement, benefits to UNISON resulting from the learning partnership and lastly, the future of UNISON sponsored formal learning in social care organisations. These themes were discussed alongside excerpts from the interview transcripts. Following this, the evidence from the research data was used to explore something which I term a formal learning network and to also identify what type of learning network this represents based on the descriptions from Poell et al (2000) which were outlined in chapter five.

It is an aim of the research to not only uncover the formal learning, but also the informal learning which occurs as a part of this network. Both types of learning are considered as



important in the SCIE learning characteristics and by the learning network theorists themselves. Poell (2006) stated a learning program ‘can take place in a formalised training setting organised by HRD professionals, but learning is also brought about informally by the employees themselves in their everyday work situation’ (p153). A more thorough analysis of the nature of informal learning in social work and the interaction between formal and informal is made in chapter seven of the thesis.

In chapter seven the interaction between formal and informal learning in the LPR learning network have been explored. This analysis was important as clearly learning in the LPR learning network was not limited to formal learning. The case study research evidence from the learning actors was outlined and discussed in relation to their feedback on informal learning in the LPR in order to address the research objectives 2(c) and 3. The LPR learning action theories on informal learning were firstly described and discussed and from this the LPR informal learning network was uncovered. Some relationships between formal learning and informal learning in the workplace for the social work students has been identified and discussed. The evidence from chapters six and seven was then combined to consider the exact nature of UNISON’s role in workplace learning and its link to creating a successful learning organisation. Further limitations of the Learning Network Theory were revealed.

In chapter eight the analysis from chapters four, five, six and seven were drawn together and reflected upon to consider the benefits and limitations of the Learning Network Theory. Conceptual problems with the learning processes, learning action theories, learning structures and the theoretical types of learning network were outlined. A modified figure was proposed to enhance the theory based on the evidence from the Learning Partnership Route case study,

expressing the components in light of the reflections which were made from its application to the LPR case study. This revised figure repositions the learning actors to the heart of the learning network. In contrast to the learning network proposed by Poell et al (2000), the flow between components is not restricted. In the original learning network, the flow between components travels from the learning structures to the learning actors then to the learning processes and back to the learning structures. The new figure places no such restriction, allowing for a variety of interaction between components. Following this an alternative theory, the expansive- restrictive framework (Fuller and Unwin 2003, Unwin 2004) was considered as an alternative to the application of LNT.

### **Key Conclusions**

The key conclusions from this case study research will now be outlined. Applying the learning network interpretative framework to the case study interview data has enabled an investigation into the action theories held by the key actors on the concept and idea of a learning organisation. This provided evidence in response to research objective 1, to identify and explore the concept of a learning organisation from the viewpoint of the actors involved in the Learning Partnership Route. What this has revealed is that the knowledge and theory differs not only between the organisations involved, but also between actors from the same organisation. Responses from the interview participants differed extremely, revealing that whilst the actors are constrained by the organisation in terms of what learning actions they are able to employ, their action theories around the concept of a learning organisation and culture are fluid and not something for which they all have a crystallised set of norms and ideas.

In starting out with the fieldwork the participants were not directly asked to define the concept of the learning organisation as it was not an expectation that all participants would be familiar with or use the concept. However during the fieldwork it was uncovered that some of the actors in this learning network were familiar with the concept and had ideas, norms and rules about how this concept can work in practice.

These findings also provide support for the role of Unison in social care workplace learning, in response to research objective 2(a), to explore the ways in which Unison can support and help implement a learning organisation and culture within social work organisations. Whilst the interview participants from the social care organisation gave conflicting action theories in relation to the learning organisation, in contrast the participants from Unison provided clearer and distinct action theories of learning in organisations. One can conclude from this finding that Unison is well placed to assist social care organisations in achieving their goal of becoming a learning organisation or increasing organisational learning.

The Unison partnership actors gave different, but clear action theories on the learning organisation. They were all consistent in appearing to have a clear and crystallised idea of what the concept of a learning organisation means. Most often this definition encompassed the role of Unison in this being achieved in a social care organisation and the impact which the LPR students have in this process. The Learning Partnership Route learning actors from the Open University portrayed clear notions of the learning organisation as a concept and used it as did the Unison learning actors in relation to the role that students can have in leading the social care organisation towards the goal of a learning organisation. The LPR learning actors

from the social care organisation, however, appeared confused about what this concept represents.

Poell et al (2000) contend that norms and ideas can 'explicitly guide and legitimise people's actions' (p33). If this is correct then this may explain why Unison has been successful as a force in learning in social care organisations during the last twenty years. It is also possible to suggest that to achieve the goal of becoming a successful learning organisation, social care employees need to possess clear and non-conflicting ideas about this concept.

Next, I address the conclusions that can be drawn in response to the research objective; to summarise the role that UNISON was found to have in workplace learning through the LPR learning network. Sutherland and Rainbird (2000) identified three major stakeholders in the workplace; namely government, employers and employees. In the LPR learning network, however, the trade union, UNISON is considered to be a key learning actor and the role of government is confined to being a part of the policies and programmes which led to the planning and execution of the LPR. UNISON was identified as having played a number of roles in the LPR learning network, including a key role engaging the employer and employees in the LPR. UNISON's relationship with the case study social care employer and their more coherent notion of the concept of a learning organisation, enabled them to become involved in both formal and informal aspects of workplace learning (refer to figure 7.2, page 197). UNISON helped to initiate the LPRSW and through engaging with employees, they were able to encourage an open learning environment and an increase in learning resources.

For example, one key role was in widening participation to the social work degree. Evidence from the case study interviews revealed how they ensured that all employees enrolled on the LPR met the widening participation criteria outlined in the LPR route guide (The Open University 2006). As noted earlier in the summary of findings, HEFCE (2006) outlined their aim to increase the numbers of higher education participants from the workforce. In order to achieve this they suggested an increase in partnership work, but made no specific reference to the role of trade unions as partners. The evidence from the LPR case study highlights the impact that UNISON can have in encouraging employers to widen participation to social work education.

One key theme to emerge from the case study research findings is the way in which UNISON were able to build a trusting relationship with the case study social care organisation. In addition to the role of Unison in establishing relationships with learning actors at a management level, the role that Unison had in engaging with the employees and potential students is described. Unison communicates with the social care employees on a wide set of issues and their role is not limited to learning. Through this wider role they have been able to establish a greater level of trust from the employer. The need for a trusting relationship in the development of partnerships is also highlighted in Rainbird et al's (2003) exploration of employee voice and training at work through NHS and other case studies, looking at learning partnerships between managers and union representatives.

Social care learning partnership actors indicated that they believe that Unison had a successful partnership with educational providers such as the Open University and it may well be on this basis and evidence from previous successful collaborations, that encouraged the employer to

run the LPR to social work qualification (refer to the discussions in chapter 4). Interpersonal trust is something which is currently receiving attention in the academic literature on Human Resources Development (HRD). Song et al (2009) explore the effect of learning organisational culture on the relationship between interpersonal trust and organisational commitment and their results indicated that learning organisation culture acts as a mediating variable to explain the link between interpersonal trust and organisational commitment, thus providing a clear link between learning organisation culture and interpersonal trust. Song et al (2009) suggest that whilst the impact of a learning culture has previously been explored as to its effect on performance related variables such as job satisfaction, 'interpersonal trust is one of the basic components for enhancing the learning organisation culture that has not been studied by HRD researchers' (p148). They conclude that the interaction between the constructs of interpersonal trust, learning organisation culture and organisational commitment should be considered in the planning of HRD interventions and programmes.

The findings from this case study research and the identified role of Unison in gaining the trust of employers and employees to implement a formal learning program in the social care organisation, again highlight the link between interpersonal trust, learning culture and organisational commitment. Interpersonal trust is a key construct here. It is the role of key representatives from Unison who built trust through interpersonal relationships that enable a level of trust at an individual level and commitment to learning at an organisational level. This Learning Partnership Route case study provides a different take on the interaction between the three constructs than that provided by Song et al (2009). In contrast to asserting the effect of learning organisation culture on the link between interpersonal trust and organisational commitment, the case study evidence provides a different picture. In the LPR learning

network trust is believed to have enabled organisational commitment to the provision of formal learning for employees.

Following the outcome of the recent political changes in the UK, it is unclear how this will impact on workplace learning in general and in particular, to the role of trade unions in social care organisation workplace learning. The results of the 2010 general election lead to the formation of the coalition Conservative and Liberal Democratic government, replacing Labour. This new Coalition government is facing economic challenges in terms of reducing the country's deficit and debt and has outlined plans to make six billion of savings this year (Cameron 28<sup>th</sup> May 2010). In a letter to all university Vice Chancellors and Principals, Vince Cable and David Willetts stated that 'This Government strongly believes in the value of education, training and skills. As our Coalition Agreement makes clear, we will continue to invest in further and higher education. But of course further and higher education cannot be exempt from the wider need for reductions in public spending' (Department for Business Innovation and Skills 26<sup>TH</sup> May 2010). More recently in a speech on the economy, David Cameron outlined the intended cut in public spending to cut Britain's economic deficit (Cameron 7<sup>th</sup> June 2010).

Whilst the size of the public sector has got way out of step with the size of the private sector... We're going to have to get it back in line... We will carry out Britain's unavoidable deficit reduction plan in a way that strengthens and unites the country. We are not doing this because we want to, driven by theory or ideology. We are doing this because we have to, driven by the urgent truth that unless we do, people will suffer and our national interest will suffer. But this government will not cut this deficit in a way

that hurts those we most need to help that divides the country or that undermines the spirit and ethos of our public services.

In reaction to this speech, Dave Prentis the UNISON General Secretary has condemned these cuts and argued that ‘This was a chilling attack on the public sector, public sector workers, the poor, to the sick and the vulnerable...it is a complete nonsense to claim that you can cut tens of billions of pounds from public spending and still protect ‘front-line’ services’ (Prentis 2010). These cuts will inevitably present a challenge to social care workforces and impact upon spending on learning and training. However, in addition to resisting the planned cut back, UNISON remains committed to encouraging learning opportunities in the workplace. In February 2010 they signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), which is a commitment to a shared support of an increase in the number of adults engaged in both formal and informal learning and a further commitment to widening participation to underrepresented groups (NIACE 2010). The future of learning partnerships like the LPRSW, however, cannot yet be fully assessed.

Finally, I address the findings which relate to the research objective 3; to outline the ways in which the findings from this case study research contribute to and further understanding of social care workplace learning theory and research methods. Through the application of Learning Network Theory to the LPR case study, not only are the roles of UNISON in workplace learning uncovered, but also in addition to this, a number of conceptual problems with the theory itself are identified. They include problems with the application of the term learning actors, the learning processes, learning action theories and learning climate, the



concepts of formative and informative learning and the learning structures. A number of suggestions have been made to improve the Learning Network Theory and its application to social care learning partnerships. These include the extension of the theory to consider the concepts of formal and informal learning more thoroughly and developing the theoretical types of learning network, to incorporate the notion of a learning organisation. Uncovering the theoretical type of learning network in the case study extended the theory further than simply describing the data. The learning network arguably allows for analysis of the key criteria which make up a learning organisation, analysed through the four theoretical types. The LNT can be adapted to analyse the success of learning in an organisation, building upon the theoretical types of network and with background information, such as that described in the SCIE (2004) learning organisation resource.

The LNT outlined in this thesis could be adopted for use as a tool for data analysis by researchers investigating workplace learning partnerships in other types of public sector and private sector organisations. The LNT provides a model through which workplace learning partnership can be described and analysed.

### **Alternative approaches to the case study**

Not only did the learning network theorists describe and explain the learning network, they also addressed what they called the labour network and depicted the relationship between the two. The labour network illustrates the way in which work is organised. The interpretative framework applied to the case study data was limited to the application of the learning network. The case study research was not however conducted with the aims and objectives of uncovering the social care organisations labour network or its connection to learning.

One alternative to employing the interpretative framework of the Learning Network Theory (LNT) to the case study data would be to employ the restrictive versus expansive continuum outlined by Evans et al in 2006. This continuum is prescriptive in that it outlines the characteristics of restrictive and expansive learning environments. This theory is used in the application to specific workplaces and learning environments and does not easily lend itself to application to a partnership learning network which involves more than one organisation. It may be possible for each organisation's learning environment to be placed along the continuum; however the case study data does not provide enough detailed evidence to address all the features of learning environment outlined.

Despite the criticisms of the Learning Network Theory, which were made after reflecting on the relationship between the components of the LPR learning network, the theory proved a useful tool to interpret the case study data. In chapter two, the literature review, a number of different approaches to learning organisations and workplace learning were identified. Many of these approaches have predominantly been applied to organisations in the private sector and have provided many detailed accounts of what constitutes forms of organisational learning, learning organisation, workplace learning and a learning climate. Applying the interpretative framework of the Learning Network Theory enabled an analysis in which the nature of learning activities and the roles of the learning actors involved was not already pre-subscribed. This enabled the unique role of UNISON in this social care case study to be identified and described at length. From the outset the research objectives were about exploring concepts of learning in a social care organisation from the point of view of the actors involved in the LPR.

The Learning Network Theory provided a satisfactory basis from which this investigation could begin.

As a critical realist a number of research methods were available and could be used to address the research objectives. As the learning partnership has already been underway for a number of years the method by which it was investigated was limited to non action or experimental methods and needed to be met by in depth qualitative research to address the 'why' and 'how' questions. Whilst it provides an in depth naturalistic account, ethnography would not have been practical. The research objectives call for not only an investigation of the current learning situation but also a reflection and description of the partnership over the last seven years.

Whilst using a method such as direct observation would have provided an insight into current informal and formal learning in the organisation it would not have been possible to look at the role of UNISON in this process. The very nature of the partnership involves three separate organisations and a whole host of individual actors, in different geographical locations, therefore observation would be difficult to achieve.

Another method which would have provided evidence on learning in the social care organisation would have been potentially to survey the partnership actors and social care organisation employees. However this would not have allowed for in depth and reflective accounts on the role of UNISON. Whilst a survey could have been employed to quantify the learning opportunities available to the social care employees, this may not have uncovered informal learning opportunities. In the literature a number of characteristics and activities which are believed to lead to informal learning (Marsick and Watkins 2001) are identified. However to have utilised informal learning theory and survey the employees would have

meant an assumption of what activities or processes led to informal learning in the social care organisation. An in depth qualitative account was employed to explore informal learning practices without placing any preconceived ideas on what these may be.

A longitudinal study could be adopted to further investigate the extent to which the role of UNISON in the LPR learning network encouraged both formal and informal learning in the case study learning actors and workplace. This could focus, in particular, on the learning experiences of the LPR students in the years following qualification.

### **Suggestions for additional research**

The findings from the case study research and subsequent application of LNT to analyse the data have provided evidence highlighting a number of problems with the practical application of this theory. Further research needs to be conducted into the relationship between informal and formal learning in social care organisations or indeed other organisations before a new theory or tool for assessing workplace learning can be completed. This theory would need to build on the work on the Learning Network Theorists, but also address the limitations of the LNT theory which have been outlined in this thesis. Application of the Learning Network Theory (LNT) allowed an investigation of LPR workplace without any presubscribed notion of what constitutes successful workplace learning. If the results which can be gained from the application of the theory are to be of benefit, then the criteria of successful and unsuccessful learning organisations need to be further defined. For example criteria that are comparable with those described by Evans et al (2006), and also build on the four types of learning network which are described by Poell et al (2000).

Research is needed to ascertain the optimum relationship between formal and informal learning required by organisations to achieve successful workplace learning. This will enable organisations to advance to the highest level of the learning pyramid described by Mumford (2006, p7), and thus become a learning organisation.

The case study research has also shown the value for employees in extending their external network outside of the social care organisation and the benefits of a partnership with UNISON and the Open University. The research findings revealed a whole host of ways in which UNISON are able to positively contribute to workplace learning, including their help in enabling a higher level of formal and informal learning in their workplace. This work could be extended to advance research into the relationship between learning in the workplace, Learning Network Theory, and the creation of learning organisations.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter the all the thesis chapters are summarised. This is followed by an outline of the key conclusions drawn from the LPR learning network case study research. Alternatives to the case study method employed in this research are then considered. Proposals for additional research that would contribute and further progress in this academic area are then outlined.

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